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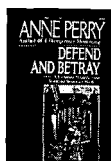
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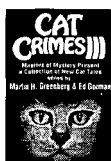
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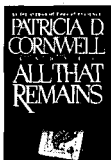
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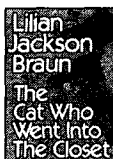
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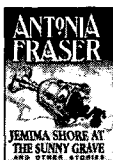
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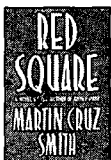
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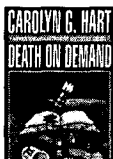
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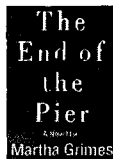
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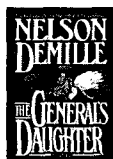
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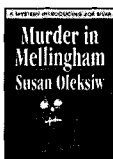
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# CONTENTS



## SHORT STORIES

|  |            |
|--|------------|
| <b>I LIKE THE DARK</b> by Roberta Hall           | <b>6</b>   |
| <b>STATUE OF A SWINE</b> by Steven Nelson        | <b>23</b>  |
| <b>RIPE FOR DEATH</b> by Edie Ramer              | <b>31</b>  |
| <b>A WOMAN'S VOICE</b> by Joseph Hansen          | <b>50</b>  |
| <b>A FEW WORMS AMONG FRIENDS</b> by Bob Stretton | <b>86</b>  |
| <b>THE MEISTERSINGER</b> by Doug Allyn           | <b>96</b>  |
| <b>THE SCHOLAR AND THE ROSE</b> by Dan Crawford  | <b>124</b> |

## MYSTERY CLASSIC

|   |            |
|---|------------|
| <b>THE CAPTURED SHADOW</b> by F. Scott Fitzgerald | <b>130</b> |
|---|------------|

## DEPARTMENTS

|  |            |
|--|------------|
| <b>EDITOR'S NOTES</b>                        | <b>4</b>   |
| <b>THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH</b>             | <b>49</b>  |
| <b>UNSOLVED</b> by Robert Kesling            | <b>84</b>  |
| <b>SOLUTION TO THE AUGUST "UNSOLVED"</b>     | <b>93</b>  |
| <b>BOOKED &amp; PRINTED</b> by Mary Cannon   | <b>150</b> |
| <b>MURDER BY DIRECTION</b> by William Heller | <b>153</b> |
| <b>THE STORY THAT WON</b>                    | <b>155</b> |

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# EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

Joseph Hansen, author of our cover story "A Woman's Voice," has a new collection of short stories coming out more or less simultaneously with this issue. It's titled *Bohannon's Country* (Viking), a hardcover compendium of five stories. For Hack Bohannon fans, or Joseph Hansen fans, and especially perhaps for those who like "A Woman's Voice," who have missed earlier segments of the Madrone/Settlers Cove/Rodd Canyon world of California's central coast, and who want to read more about it, *Bohannon's Country* makes a good addition to one's library. It also contains an introduction by the author.

Three of the stories—"The Olcott Nostrum," "The Owl in the Oak," and "An Excuse for Shooting Earl"—first appeared in AHMM's pages. All three are Bohannon tales. The remaining two have to do with other inhabitants of that world; "Molly's Aim" first appeared in EQMM, and "McIntyre's Donald" was published in the *South Dakota Review*.

*Bohannon's Country* was preceded in 1988 by another collection titled *Bohannon's Book* (Foul Play Press), containing five more Bohannon stories, of which three were first published here.

"A Few Worms Among Friends" is Bob Stretton's first

(continued on page 30)

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FICTION

# I Like the Dark

by Roberta Hall



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I like the dark.

Other people don't seem to understand this. I'm sure they don't, or they wouldn't get all disturbed when I try to explain it to them. They seem to think it's particularly abnormal for a girl, though not the only thing about me that is. But for me it's a giant security blanket, soft and safe and comfortable. I don't have to curl up into a little ball and crawl under it and shiver, I don't have to grasp it grimly—it's there, all over like a huge umbrella, and in it I'm safe, so I can be free, stretch my arms and legs, talk out loud to myself if I keep it to a reasonable volume.

Which is the volume I prefer. One thing the dark means to me is freedom from the hammering yammering jangling jabber of the daylight people.

Freedom, I suppose, is the key word. The dark is the only place I feel truly free.

In the dark I have many experiences. Occasional adventures. Only very rarely a fright. Mostly the dark is my thinking-space, and my experiences are inner thoughts and feelings. I want to chronicle these experiences, the ones that are important enough and can be captured in words, not as a diary or a journal but as my occasional paper-friend to whom I can confide things no one else would understand/care about/be trusted with. (A diary would formalize me too much.) Maybe someday long after I'm gone someone will understand me. Or perhaps I will re-read it years from now and understand myself.

*Thursday late.* I thought for a moment I might have an Adventure this evening, possibly even a Fright. Now as I think about it I'm not sure whether I did or not.

My mother was even more oppressive than usual at suppertime, and I retreated as usual to my room as soon as possible. After fifteen years I still fail to see how a person could be so *intrusive* and at the same time . . . I suppose there is a perfect word. What I mean is, not available for any *pleasant* social purposes.

At any rate, I went through the usual stage setting. Pillows and wig on the bed. Donned my night-prowling costume. With her television blaring, there was little need for quiet, but it's good training. I noiselessly closed the window behind me, silently trod across porch roof, kitchen roof, shed roof, and went down the oak tree. I must get a cord for my glasses.



Across the back yard, breathing the dark clean air of freedom. Back behind Johnson's, Kitsche's, Tagliano's, then I just walked for a while. There were a couple of dogs, but I heard them and crossed the street before I got to them.

Eventually, of course, I ended up where I always end up: on the bench under the maple behind the Confederate monument. It is droll and poignant that my ponderings and meditations have to take place looking at the rear of General Whoever's horse. I anticipate the day when I dare walk as far as the Old Cemetery, where there's peace and freedom even in the daytime.

The shadow of the statue and the overhang of the tree and the thick shrubbery behind make a broad nest for me there, safe but open. Usually my stream of consciousness begins flowing soon, but this evening is balked.

Usually there is a little of what Dr. Scofield called Rumination, and then I flow into meditation or fantasies or what I call pondering, a kind of directed meditation which I keep bringing back to the central issue.

But tonight the rumination kept on and on. I kept coughing up the dry cud of my day's experiences, unresolved problems, a longer than usual list of faux pases, things I should have done better and things I could see no way to do well at all. I had intended to ponder on Ethics, and how it/they fits and/or fails to fit with law, morality, custom, religion, and whatever.

Sometimes I feel that I am imprisoned not by my mother and the world but by myself. Which Dr. Scofield has said, if not very convincingly. But the prison grows larger, at least, when I get away from all that.

While I was thinking thoughts like those, I heard footsteps approaching. Usually when this happens the person is in a hurry, anxiously going somewhere away from the dark and aloneness; whoever it is circles around the general and his horse, continues the way he had been going, and is out of sight in seconds and out of earshot in a minute.

But these heavy footsteps were slow and slowing. In a moment I saw him—not shuffling, not striding, plodding with weary strength—coming around the statue and straight toward me.

I panicked inwardly and froze outwardly.

I had had many fantasies about this moment that seemed destined to occur: meeting someone on my dark-walks, someone *significant*.

Some of these fantasies were frightening, terrifying. Some were warming and fulfilling. All were interesting.

In the gratifying fantasies I meet a soulmate, another person who finds freedom in the dark. Sometimes she is a mirror image of me, the twin sister I never had but almost magically talk myself into believing I had—someone who can *reinforce* me, lend me the strength I need to deal with inner and outer life struggles.

Sometimes he is the partner of my romantic fantasies, but this is an image I cannot focus on, compounded of fragments that don't fit together. The boy in Latin class with big ears, a face in an old movie, the photograph of my father I found and hid. This fantasy is one of heart-hunger, not so much body-hunger. I feel vague physical stirrings and they terrify me, and I wonder why or how nearly everyone at school seems to be doing something about them with what seems almost unconcern. I read all I can find on the subject, but none of it seems to relate to me intimately and personally.

Other times these fantasies contrarily drift the wrong way, and I am the victim of violence. This is extremely terrifying, de-meaning, and somehow almost a relief. In that when events become outside my control I can relax the terrible vigilance I have maintained since childhood; when the worst comes, one no longer need fear its approach. I remember when I was a child. Someone told me that I would die if I did not breathe. I stayed awake most of the night trying to remember to breathe so I would not die.

The wistfulest feelings I have in the fantasies are when it is my father I meet in what my mother calls my night-prowling. She doesn't know I still prowl.

This fantasy changes and is never quite satisfying. I never quite believe in my ability to start the conversation that leads to our mutual discovery, I don't have a clear enough image of how he might look now nor believe he would recognize me after so many years.

While I am thinking these thoughts—it took me half an hour to write but only moments to go through my mind—he is walking toward me. Slowly and fearfully I slide inch by inch to the dark end of the iron bench. He half stumbles on a loose brick where tree roots have pushed the walkway up. He takes his hands out of his coat pockets.

I am trembling, but not from the light autumn breeze. And not only from fear. Perhaps this is a dangerous person, perhaps he is my long absent father. He is too old and heavy and slow-moving to be my romantic fantasy.

He is turning to sit down when he sees me.

Hello, he says, I didn't know this pew was occupied. Nice evening, isn't it?

No, I say, it's chilly and soon the leaves will be falling from my protective maple tree and suddenly this park has become too crowded. But I say it inside my head because my lips are frozen with fear and also I wouldn't want to seem discourteous to a possibly harmless stranger.

So I stare straight ahead, my eyes fixed on the posterior parts of the general's horse. After a minute I hear a rustling sound and quickly flick my eyes in his direction without turning my head. He is reaching inside his topcoat. I fantasize that he is reaching for a weapon, a knife or a gun, and frighten myself for a moment by half believing it.

But he is only loading a large, curved pipe with tobacco. He goes through what looks like an unnecessarily long and complicated process and finally takes out a lighter and lights it.

The smoke drifts past my face. It smells good, a clean, harsh tobacco smell and not a burnt candy smell like most of them, but I want to be disagreeable and drive him away because I am afraid of him or afraid of myself in his presence, so I make a coughing noise and fan my face.

Excuse me, he says, the wind seems to be the wrong way. I'll be glad to trade ends with you if my smoke bothers you.

No, thank you, I say. I mean to sound supercilious, but it comes out squeaking, like a frightened child. I have to be leaving soon.

Don't let me drive you away, he says. I come here for peace and quiet, I suppose you do the same. There's enough peace and quiet here for two people. If I sit there and you sit here, the smoke won't hit you. Or if you find my presence really distasteful I can get on the brass horse and ride pillion behind General Lee.

Lee, of course; it's generic Confederate and not a local hero.

Before I think I say, Most people don't know what a pillion is.

I'm not sure *what* it is, he answers, but I know *where* it is.

Despite my panic concealed by pretended hauteur, I giggle, a stupid little schoolgirl giggle instead of at least a decent urbane chuckle. That's all right, I answer, I actually like the smell of it.

Good, he says. I'll be quiet now so as not to disturb you. And he does, though what disturbs me is not his talking.

In between other thoughts I wonder if I have offended him and hurt his feelings, and that gives me guilt feelings. Then I wonder if he is subtly telling me to shut up and stop bothering him, and this makes me feel dumb and defensive and then angry at either him or myself.

The other thoughts I think these between are: I wonder if my father smoked a pipe, and could this be why I like it? I can imagine my hazy image of him with a pipe. Then I can imagine him totally pipeless, too, so that doesn't help.

This is embarrassing to say even to my paper-friend the nondiary, but I think I should. I believe that is the kind of thinking Dr. Scofield was talking about when he said, Jot down spontaneous insights.

There are millions of men whom I could not reasonably prove to myself are not my father. If I knew for sure that he was dead or wanted a son instead of a daughter and thus left my mother or that I was illegitimate by an unknown sire and that my memories of him are imaginary, I would not be so obsessed. But her only answer always translates to the statement that her irrational authority is more valid than my rational questions and more important than my sincere feelings.

I sneak sidelong glances at the man on the bench. For many reasons I believe that he is not my father, but there is that eternal, inevitable little point of uncertainty.

In order to keep myself from blurting out, You're not my father, are you?, I look for something else to say, and what I blurt out instead is, I don't have anything against daylight or sunshine and all, it's just *people*.

Instead of looking at me as if he knows I didn't take my Thora-zine today, he only says in a patient, tired voice, I know exactly what you mean.

He doesn't, of course. He is too plodding, calm, and placid to understand what it is like to go literally psychotic from human pressure. But understanding that he also experiences this pressure gives me a feeling of calmth, acceptance, camaraderie.

For a while I am able to sit there in comfortable silence, knowing that I am too stimulated by external factors for a pure Meditation even if I had wanted one, but my Pondering keeps turning into Fantasies about fathers and soulmates.

Then the hard iron bench begins hurting my bones. I am wearing my thin coat over my thin pajamas, and I don't have much fat and muscle over them. Plus the cold of the iron is seeping into them. I try shifting positions, and that doesn't help much.

I think I'll go now, he says. I just needed to have a little tranquillity.

Oh, don't go, I say. I am startled and a little frightened by knowing that if my hands hadn't been deep in my pockets I would have reached out to hold him back.

Well, you seemed to be getting a little agitated, he says. I thought my presence might be bothering you.

No, not at all, I respond. This is a hard bench and it's a little cold and I was getting a little uncomfortable is all.

You're welcome to my coat, he says. I'm overdressed. I thought it was colder out than it is, so I have a flannel shirt and sweater, too.

No, that's all right, I say hastily. What if he has lice or something? My mother is always saying things like that, and we had lice at school one time. I'm more comfortable now, I add.

We lapse back into the comfortable silence, but somehow I no longer find it comfortable. I can't put my finger on it, but a disturbing question is hanging in the air unanswered. I want to say something innocuous, avoid whatever this question is, but make talk to fill this silence which is no longer comfortable. But I can't think of anything to say.

My bottom is getting colder, and my legs are cramping. I want to go, but I can't think of the right way to do it. I am growing uneasy for some reason and a little frightened as well as increasingly uncomfortable. We continue to sit there unspeaking.

Finally he makes a sudden movement, and I freeze in panic for fear of being attacked. But he is looking at his watch.

Nearly midnight, he says. I'd better be rolling home, tomorrow's a working day. I suppose it's a schoolday for you, isn't it?

I nod and go mm-hm like the cat's got my tongue.

I'd be glad to walk you home, he says. Walking the city streets at night isn't the safest thing in the world.

That's all right, I say. I'll be fine. And looking almost as panicked as I feel, I get up suddenly and walk, almost run, away.

Goodnight, he calls. Part of me wants to answer him, part of me doesn't, but my voice is paralyzed so I can't anyhow.



On the way home I think someone is following me, but I can't be sure whether *I believe* someone is. There are so many situations where you know something is unlikely, but you can't be totally sure it isn't so. They exhaust me by confusing me.

Sometimes I duck around a corner and stop suddenly, but there is no one there. Once I make a deliberate shortcut across gravel that makes a crunching sound, then run to a hiding place and listen. No one comes. Unless they know about the gravel and went around it.

When I get home, I am more frightened than when I left the park. I have the feeling that I have failed at something, and I am embarrassed but not sure what I'm embarrassed about.

*Friday evening.* I want out! My mother is more obnoxious than usual. My head is full of Ruminations and pointless recriminations for all the faux pases I made last night. The novel I am reading is depressing. I hope I never discover that Thomas Hardy is my ancestor. He makes me want to slash my wrists. And why do all his characters do things that cause them troubles but not things that get them out of troubles. They are crazy.

—I took a Thorazine. They remind me too much of myself. It doesn't make me feel mellow, just dumb and spaced out. At least I'm not bothered by her TV and all the nasty Friday night noises that keep me trapped indoors. Why do they have to invade the time and space that is my freedom?

Partly I resent them. They are having fun, and I hate them because I am on the outside. I hate to admit that even to myself. Sometimes I think about getting drunk and having sex and I guess it scares me more than it disgusts me.

Good night.

*Saturday.* I think I will go out when it gets later. Sometimes Saturday is as bad as Friday, but it seems quiet tonight. I will struggle through another chapter of Hardy and then go if it's still quiet.

—He wasn't there. I stayed from before eleven till after midnight when the Noisy ones started screeching their cars and yelling. I couldn't do any Meditation or even Pondering. I kept on having Fantasies. They went a little way, then fell apart, but at least I didn't have a whole lot of Ruminations to depress me on top of the Hardy. I must go to the library Monday.

I guess I must write down my Fright. I don't want to go back over it, but maybe, as Dr. Scofield says, it will help defuse it.

I was sitting on the more open end of the bench. A car turned the corner, and the high beam headlights shone right at me. I heard boys whistling and yelling, and I froze. Then I heard the car slowing down, and I was terrified that they would stop and—gang-assault me.

The car made an illegal right turn at the pointed end of the park and was slowly driving back up the other side.

Instead of being too panicked to move, I got sort of outside myself and acted very *adaptively*. It was as if I could almost see my own actions from another vantage point. I quickly left the bench and ploughed through the little opening in what I call the Laurels because that's what they would be in a British novel. I'm not sure we have laurels over here. Ligustrum, that's what they are called.

So I crouched there breathless with fear in the middle of the clump of ligustrums as the carful of rowdy boys drove slowly by looking. They circled around one more time and then loudly drove on. So I started breathing again and almost ran all the way home. My heart is still palpitating.

*Sunday aft.* I thought I might be so agitated I would have to take another hateful Thorazine to get any rest, but afterwards there was a letdown and I slept the night through without any disturbing dreams.

Despite the Fright last night, I will go again tonight. Sunday night is the hushed cathedral of my dark-walking week. And besides, I can admit to myself that I want to see *him* again. I'm *almost* sure he is a harmless presence. Though I could convince myself that he is building up my confidence in order to do something truly wicked later; and that thought frightens me.

Except that most of my relationship with him has been Fantasy. We haven't really had all those long talks about cabbages and kings and important things.

—Ah! A nice fog is developing. I love fog. It is as safe as dark, safer, and softer and prettier, too. Sometimes I fantasize I'm in nineteenth century England when I'm in the fog. The world then is not so harsh and *clangorous*.

*Late Sunday—actually early Monday.* He was there! Even before I arrived. At first I wasn't sure, but then I saw the pipe and smelled the same kind of real tobacco, so I stopped pretending to walk

busily past and came to the bench.

Hi! he says. I saved your end of the bench in case you came by. I thought we might meet again.

Thank you, I respond. Hardly at all ill at ease. I sit down and maybe for the first time actually look him in the face. I feel my face smiling—it is a tight smile, I can feel it pulling my muscles and skin. I must not smile very much, or it wouldn't feel so strange to my face.

His face is ugly. Not frighteningly ugly, reassuringly ugly. He looks as if he has lived through a lot and suffered through it and stayed somehow goodnatured.

Then I wonder how my face looks to him, and I blush. I know he can't see my blush in the foggy half light, but thinking about blushing makes me blush again.

I don't have enough control of how my body moves and my facial expressions and what comes out of my mouth. I must work for more control.

So I wonder what he thinks about my face being too thin and my nose being too long and me looking like an owl with my big glasses on my nearsighted eyes. He is too polite to say anything about it. He actually smiles, which frightens me a little and I cast my eyes down like a demure maiden in an elderly novel. Sometimes I think that is what I am.

And I blurt out, *Consequor, consequi, consecutus sum*. And it sounds so ridiculous I laugh at myself. He grins and chuckles because it is absurd, not because he understands. I understand but am not sure I can explain it but feel I ought to try to explain.

That, he says, is, I think, one of the most original conversational gambits I've heard lately. I'm sorry I can't reply in kind, but the only Latin I can recall offhand is *amo, amas, amat*.

I am a little frightened and embarrassed that he chose that particular verb, though it probably doesn't mean anything. Why I did that, I say, is because I feel very secure giving the principal parts of Latin verbs.

I believe you, he says. And like most of us, you feel insecure when you get out of your safe space.

All I could do was nod and smile in pleasure that at least he listens and at least he has a general idea what I'm trying to say. I want to *talk* to him, but I'm too inhibited. And I guess he senses this. He starts talking very casually about himself. He works at

the newspaper. He used to be a reporter but now he is mostly stuck in an office.

And before long I am telling him how I want to be a writer when I'm an adult. And he gives me helpful advice which I very much appreciate though some of it I only understand superficially.

The night is totally quiet, no one is abroad and the fog envelops all in peace and safety. We end up talking till way after midnight, just like a normal conversation between two normal people.

This makes me feel insecure because it is like sailing under false colors. I feel as if I am deceiving him by appearing normal. I try to hold my tongue but it wants to wag so I quickly say, It must be late, tomorrow's a schoolday. It's a work day, too, he says. I'll repeat my offer to see you home. And he stands up, so I stand up and he says, Now that we've got to know each other, let's trade names. I'm Bill Lewis.

I want to say I'm Judy Jones, one of my fantasy aliases. She is an enterprising investigative reporter not much older than me but famous and prosperous. But what comes out is I'm Samantha Pigford. It always embarrasses me. I don't look like a sweet pretty soft frilly airheaded Samantha, and Pigford is just *gross*.

Glad to know you, Samantha, he says and holds his hands up a little way. I want to shake hands like a lady but I am a little phobic about touching him. It's been a real pleasure talking with you, he says.

Me too, I say gracelessly. I don't meet many adults I can have a decent civilized conversation with.

Likewise, he says. People your age and people my age, too.

He is a kindred soul. I feel a sudden rush of warmth toward him, and it panics me.

Well, I have to go now, I say. Goodbye. And I trip over my own big feet fleeing.

Au revoir, he calls after me. Which I believe is a sort of standing invitation. The warm feeling comes back with a little chilly shiver.

On the way home I know that I am being followed. I don't think I am, don't particularly *believe* I am, but I know I am. Several times I try little tests, and they reveal no follower. But there is someone there.

In one low place the fog is so thick I nearly lose my way. I think again of nineteenth century England. London. Jack the Raper. (I know.) I shiver a cold, damp, pursued shiver. Water is now dripping off my glasses. Jack the Raper is behind me. I'm blinded by the

fog. I taste blood from biting my lip to hold down the panic. Finally I hide behind a big tree and breathe deeply. I've hardly been breathing at all. The air in my lungs helps calm me, and I rationally find my way.

But while I was catching my breath I kept thinking: maybe Jack the Raper made friends with his victims first. I don't *feel* that Bill Lewis is vicious and dangerous, but I have to consider that he might be.

*Monday evening.* Very tired from staying up so late and then lying awake thinking about my new friend, and possible dangerous enemy.

I had a horrible dream. I don't want to even remember it, but I must deal with it. In the dream I am coming back from the park and feel someone following me. I hide in a dark place, and when he comes by, I leap out and hit him with a board. Then when I look it is Bill Lewis and he is still standing and is covered with blood and his eyes are open like a dead person in a late movie and I scream silently and run home. Then when I get there he is coming around the corner of the house still covered with blood. He is walking stiff-legged exactly like a zombie or a mummy in a monster movie. His eyes are staring straight ahead, but he knows where I am and he comes straight for me with his arms held out stiffly. He reaches me just before I can climb the tree to safety, and I wake up terrified. I lie there awake and shivering in fear until it is light outside.

*Tuesday.* I took a Thorazine and am feeling sleepy. I don't think I'll go out tonight.

I try to forget the terrible dream, but it won't go away.

What does it mean? Does it mean I will kill my friend? That he isn't my friend but a deadly enemy who is waiting for the opportunity to attack?

I absolutely must *not* let him "see me home." Horrible fear it might make the dream come true.

*Wednesday.* I woke up believing that it was only what Dr. Scofield called an anxiety dream. I'm just scared, and the scare took that shape to tell me about itself.

—No Bill Lewis. I sat behind General Lee's horse—Rover? Ranger? Oh, Traveller—till nearly midnight. I felt disappointed



and got hurt feelings from being stood up. Then I laughed at myself because I've stood *him* up two nights in a row, and besides, it's not like we had a regular date agreed on.

*Thursday.* We met at eleven P.M. on a Thursday. I'll be there then, and we can celebrate our Weekiversary. I'm sort of wired, but I don't want to take a Thorazine and be spaced out.

*Friday afternoon.* It was all I could do to get up and go to school this morning. My mother got obnoxious about taking me to the doctor, so I'm trying to act very sane. I will sniffle some and tell her I think that virus finally caught up with me.

A very strange and exciting night. It was very nearly eleven before I could get away. She kept interfering.

So I hurried to the park. He wasn't there, so I sat on the dark end of the bench and waited. I thought I would relax by Meditating, but my mental processes turned out to be a jumble of things, mostly Ruminations about all the things I hadn't done right this week.

Then I hear his footsteps. I can recognize them now—they sound like Burden, and enough Strength and Courage and Patience to bear it. I admire him greatly and feel sorry for him, and my heart gives a little twitch.

He comes straight to the bench and we say hi and he sits down and loads his pipe and says, I've missed you this week.

What I want to say is that I have missed him, too. I did come Wednesday but you didn't. I say, though, I haven't been feeling too well, I've stayed home.

So we talk polite talk for a while, and it sort of slips into real talk. I tell him about school and a very little about Home and wanting to be a writer when I grow up, and he tells me about the newspaper. He does a column and features, and I am slightly thrilled to find that out. I decide to look in the paper and find things he has written, and he tells me that he will take me on a personal guided tour of the newspaper if I call ahead of time.

I am feeling very good at all the good sharing when he says to me, I'm glad to see you looking more relaxed. You looked very tense earlier.

Then I remember that a few days ago he talked about my being agitated. So my mouth says before I can stop it, Do you think I'm crazy?

He looks at me and everything is silent and I want to run away and hide but I'm frozen there. Then he smiles a little smile, more like he's amused by his own thoughts than laughing at me, and says:

You set yourself up for a longer answer than you expected, Samantha. Are you ready for it?

He isn't cringing away from me the way some people do when they find out I've been under Treatment, and he really does look very kindly and not ridiculing. I want to smile and say go ahead, but all I can do is strain my mouth corners upward and nod stiffly.

Well, he says, I'm sure you've heard about the old Quaker who said, All the world is mad but thee and me and sometimes I wonder about thee. The only thing wrong with that statement, honey, is that thee and me are crazy, too.

The meaning of the statement didn't soak in right away because I was listening to how he called me honey. It didn't sound seductive or molestive, more friendly and fatherly.

How do you mean that? I manage to ask after a minute.

Well, he said, that would take several chapters, but let me give you a general idea. We all have wrong ideas, we all do stupid things, we're none of us quite in touch with reality. The difference between loners like you and me on the one hand and the mob, Mass Man, on the other is this: we try to dig for the root truth of reality, and they simply agree to agree on an arbitrary, superficial definition of it.

We talk for a long time. Mostly he talks and I listen. The front of my mind is trying to take in all the facts and ideas he is giving me, and the back of my mind keeps thinking him-and-me thoughts. I'm certain now that he isn't my father, I realize it was poor reality testing even to consider it seriously, but I find myself wishing he were. I feel saner in his presence.

Another thing he says is: Thoreau said the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. He forgot to add that man in the mass has all the wisdom and courage of a flock of stampeding sheep. But then another author, somebody contemporary, said that man is vile, but people are wonderful. The secret is to get them away from the mob, deal with them one by one. You meet some fools and knaves that way, but you also meet some people that give you hope for us. For the future of mankind.

And now, missy, he says, looking at his watch, It's past time for us to get home. He stands up and says, I repeat my offer.

No thanks, I say, standing up, too. I do appreciate it, though.

Well, take care of yourself, he says. See you later. He looks as if he would like to hug me goodnight, or maybe I read his mind and that's what he's thinking. Or maybe I project my feelings onto him. The thought warms and frightens me. We smile and wave, he walks past General Lee into the light as I melt into the darkness. That seems very symbolic.

On the way home I think of hugs. The last time I was hugged was by a sixth grade English teacher. Maybe my mother would hug me if I weren't so rejecting, but her hugs always felt controlling and smothering and sort of stagy to me. Somebody more grown up than I am might be able to make some sense of that. I feel like someone whose nose is too close to what they're looking at to see it.

Then something impinges on my awareness. I know for a certainty that I am being followed. I do things like walking swiftly, then dodging into a dark corner. One time I think I hear very quiet footsteps behind me but I can't be sure, and right then I don't dare turn to look.

I walk rapidly down an alley and look for a weapon. I find an empty wine bottle that has been abandoned there. I pick it up in a death grip, scurry on down the alley, and step into someone's back yard through an open gate behind a storage shed.

The footsteps are coming, closer than I had thought because he is trying to walk very quietly. They sound not so much thump, thump, thump as just a slithering across the smooth old cobblestones.

I can't believe he's done this to me—built up my confidence in him, given me warm, good feelings, and then sneakily followed me like this. I decide I will give him a chance to explain, then hit him and run screaming up the yard and hammer on the back door.

The footsteps stop. Can I hear his breathing, or is that my own? My heartbeat feels like syncopated bass drums in my ears, and my vision is blurring and narrowing from adrenaline or blood pressure.

The light is wrong. The only light in the alley is from a street-lamp at the other end of the block, but the yard is softly lit by lights in the house. He can see me before I can see him.

And he does. As I am trying to almost slide silently along the wall of the shed away from the flimsy wire fence, he leaps over and almost throws himself at me. The light is dim, and I more feel him

than see him. He grabs me hard, painfully hurting my left shoulder and my right ribs and breast.

I want to scream and no sound comes out. I am more terrified than I have ever been in my life, it is worse than a nightmare. Then some rational part of me tells me that I still have the bottle in my hand.

I draw my arm back to swing the bottle. But. I don't know how hard to hit. I don't want to kill him, just disable him so I can escape. So at the last instant I pull back on my swing and don't hit very hard.

That was the wrong thing to do. It hurts him and makes him angry but does not stop him. He takes his left arm off my ribs and breast and draws back to hit me very hard while still holding my shoulder with his right hand.

Perhaps it is true that the insane have superhuman strength and that I am insane. I go into a sort of frenzy, I hit him on the head with the bottle very loudly, and hit him and hit him. I can't see it because my eyes are closed. I think I feel him falling away from me, but then I feel a hard hand around my wrist and hear a voice.

Dammit, Samantha, *stop!* the voice says. You can stop now, he's down for the count. That last time it was *me* you hit.

I open my eyes. Bill Lewis is standing there holding my thin wrist in his big hand. It seems strange that this makes me feel safe more than threatened.

Down on the ground is someone much younger and slimmer than Bill, and his head and face, I can tell in the dark, are covered with blood. It takes me a minute to realize what has happened. Then I take my eyes from him and look back at Bill, and he has blood on his face, too, on the left cheekbone, and around his eye is swollen and darkish.

I break into tears, and without understanding everything, I try to tell him I am sorry I hurt him, and we end up with him hugging me and patting me on the back and making dear dumb soothing noises and me crying on his coat front.

After a while he says, I'll come back and clarify this situation later. Meanwhile, it's time for you to get home. Only this time I'll be right with you instead of a block behind.

He walks me home with an arm over my shoulder that doesn't feel fresh or sexual or intrusive but very gratifyingly *friends*. On the way he throws the wine bottle into a dumpster behind an

apartment house. I don't remember my dropping it or his picking it up, but I am glad it's gone.

I don't realize he is leading me home till we are in the alley behind my house. Then I turn and look at his face, and by the cold blue mercury lamp his eye is already turning an ugly dark color. I put a finger up to his face and sort of foolishly try to whimper, I'm sorry, Bill.

Maybe I did say it because he answers me. That's all right, he says—the worst part will be trying to explain how it happened. I can't tell people a fifteen-year-old girl hit me with a wine bottle. We both laugh a weak, nervous little laugh, and then he says, Now get up your tree, little monkey. I'll stay here till you're in your window.

I must have looked the question, I didn't ask it out loud. Or maybe he and I are sort of psychic together.

I've followed you every time, he says. I stayed way back because I knew you were half scared of me, but I didn't like your being alone late at night in that part of town. But tonight I wish I'd stayed closer.

But Bill, I say. I kept to dark places, I looked, I never saw you. How did you see *me*?

If you really want to be invisible in the dark, he answers, don't wear white socks with your black uniform.

I wave to him from the roof before I go in the window. I know he's seeing me safely in even though I can't see him for the shadows.



FICTION

# Statue of a Swine

by Steven Nelson



Oscar "Swine" Swinberg stepped out of the Hocksberg hardware store and lumbered across the street to his truck. From the sidewalk behind him, the shrill taunts of a pair of gangly urchins reached and reddened his ears.

"Hey, hog lover!"

"Pig pal! Pig pal!"

Swine turned around, his stolid, doughy face twitching with anger.

"Don't you kids do that way to me. You hear? I ain't going to take it. I'll give you a good switchin'." He took a couple of steps in their direction, and they sprinted to a safe distance.

"Oink! Oink! Oink!"

"Soo-ee! Soo-ee! Soo-ee!"

"You come back here, you kids. I'll tell your folks, that's what I'll do. How's come you two ain't in school today, anyhow?"

They just laughed and ran on down the walk.

Swine shook his fist at them, then shrugged his round shoulders and climbed into the plush cab of his Rolls-Royce stake truck.

As he drove along the road that led through the fields to his mansion, Swine considered his position.

"What's a man got to do to get some respect in this town, anyhow?" he muttered. "I come up from nothin'. They all know that. Why, fifty years ago I was nothin' but a snotnosed kid with one suspender and no socks. Had to sell squirrels for two bits a pair just to keep my belly half full. And look at me now! A regular hog baron or somethin'. That's what I am. I remember Pap always sayin', 'They's gold in pigs, son, but you gotta know how to mine 'em.' I guess he knowed what he was talkin' about, even if he was just a bucket mender." His hands tightened on the steering wheel, and his eyes narrowed.

"I made my own way, too. Nobody can say I didn't. And I got more money now than I could spend in the next four or five hundred years. And not just money, neither. There's land, lots of it. Why, around here, a man can't walk no farther than a dog can spit without steppin' on Swinberg property. And I got meat packin' plants and slaughterhouses and truck lines. I even got a chain of Swine's Inn restaurants. And my own little tobacco plantation in the Canary Islands, so's I can smoke any kind of see-gar I want. If I was to want a nine foot panetela with a cameroon wrapper, all's I'd have to do is whistle." He spat out of the open window of the truck and wiped the sweat from his face with a dirty bandanna.

"But you think Hocksberg cares? No, sir! Why, look what I done for 'em. I turned Wiltness's Mire into a softball park, for starters. I bought the town a new roller derby rink. It was me who set up the senior citizens' ice hockey team. And I'm the one who bought the Elks Club their own live elk. So what's it get me? 'Pig pal' and 'hog lover'!" He pulled into the long drive that led to Swine's Sty, his enormous limestone mansion.

"I even tried improvin' myself. I read up on art and music and letters and such. I took to wearin' fancy dinner jackets and silk cummerbunds. Why, I used to walk down Main Street twirlin' a gold-headed walkin' stick, all the time talking about Dante and Tintoretto. I even built a symphony hall, though to tell the truth I don't know *Swan Lake* from *Turkey in the Straw*. But that ain't the point. That just ain't the point. These folks took what I give 'em, and they didn't give nothin' back. I'll fix 'em one of these days." He stopped the truck in front of his house. But instead of going in, he continued to sit behind the wheel talking to himself.

"And the worst of it is, they eat my pork. They don't find nothin' wrong with it. Just with me. I'd like to see 'em try goin' without it sometime." His eyes lit up with malice at the thought.

"Maybe that's what I'll do." He got out of the truck and headed for the house. "Yes, that's it. Why, before I'm through there won't be enough pork left in Hocksberg to grease your hair with."

That evening Swine was pacing up and down in front of an empty fireplace, talking to his bulldog, Trixie.

"Now look, Trix. It ain't just a matter of closin' up the butcher shop. No, sir! I want to make sure that no one in Hocksberg even remembers what pork *looks* like. Do you understand? It means closin' up the whole town. And we don't want no outsiders pryin' around. Things have got to be done right. It means spreadin' a little money around, but so what? I didn't get to be the King of Fatback without greasing a few palms. I figure like this. We'll have a sort of quarantine. Nobody leaves town, and no pork comes in. After a time they'll know what's going on. And that's when we'll get what we want. Won't us, Trixie?" He threw the dog a sausage and went on talking.

"First off, we don't want nobody callin' his outa town friends and tellin' 'em what's goin' on. That won't do at all. So's we gotta give a little somethin' to the phone operator. What's her name? Eunice Woolture. Let me see. It seems like I seen a picture of her daughter Enid in the Hocksberg Herald. A real talented little scamp. Seems

like Eunice would like nothin' better than a chance to send baby Enid to Vienna to study tap dancin'. I could fix that easy enough. Then there's the mail. We don't want folks writin' the wrong things to their kin outa town. Who's the postmaster? Silas Yerb, ain't it? I guess we all know what Silas is dyin' for. Ever since he seen that write-up in *Popular Mechanics* on how to build your own three-masted schooner, he's been mooncalfin' around the lumberyard wearin' a yachtsman's cap. I figure he'd accidentally steam open a few letters for me if I wanted." Swine stopped pacing and rubbed his hands together. He liked the way things were turning out.

"Of course there's the doctor to attend to. Good old Doc Cuthbert Aimes. Biggest quack you'd ever care to meet. Ever been in his office, Trixie? He's got almost every tonsil and appendix in the county locked up in little bottles. I guess he'll have to let his fields lie fallow for a spell. Bet he'd be willin' to put the town under quarantine if I was to make a donation to that clinic for sick gold he's got in Switzerland. And that just leaves the chief of police, Aldous Druff. Aldy won't give me no trouble. Me and him go way back."

Aldous Druff was one of the few friends Swine had made as a boy. He could still remember the day he and Aldy had sat in back of Lammy Codwin's beauty parlor and split a bottle of vanilla extract.

"Yes, sir, Trix, those were the days. I'll say. Old Aldy showed me this book he found in his sister's violin case. *Burning Leaves of Gold*, it was called. All about this fellow, what was his name? Let's see, Enrico Maduro. Tobacco planter. Rode around on a big white horse all day and, and, 'broke the hearts of dusky-eyed señoritas.' That was it. And Aldy said that's what he wanted to do, break a few dusky-eyed hearts. And he ain't forgotten it, neither. Didn't he buy that old off-white mare of Sal Brooder's? And he tried growin' black mustachios like Enrico's once. But they turned out red. If I was to hint to Aldy that I needed a manager for my tobacco plantation, I'm sure he'd agree to set up a few roadblocks for me. That takes care of most of it. But of course I got actors to hire and cars to rent and who knows what else to do. I'll get it done, though, you'll see." He tossed the bulldog a final sausage and went off to bed.

And strange things began to happen in Hocksberg. It all started with the arrival of two officials from the Bureau of Pork Management. One morning a long black car with the letters B.P.M. sten-

ciled on the doors pulled up in front of Lemuel Cratz's butcher shop. A crowd began to gather. Two men got out of the car. They both wore dun-colored uniforms, badges, jackboots, and campaign hats with little pigs embroidered on the crowns. One wore a holstered service revolver and carried a walkie-talkie. The other one, the shorter, wore mirrored sunglasses and held a riding crop. They strode into the shop and told Cratz that they were there on a "routine inspection, nothing to worry about." But after taking one look at the pork chops, the short one said, "This pork is tainted. It's just full of the stuff. You got a doctor in this burg? Better get him. He'll have to confirm my inspection. But it looks bad. It looks *real* bad."

Dr. Cuthbert Aimes was sent for. He took a pork chop, placed it in a lead box, and carried it back to his office for examination. Within an hour the news was out. Quarantine. No one was to leave town, and all "pork, pork products, or anything that you even suspect as being remotely related to pork" must be turned over to designated officers to be destroyed. The plague had hit Hocksborg.

During the first day of the quarantine things went as usual. No one seemed able to fully appreciate what had happened. Some ignored the matter. Others made jokes. But on the second day people began to get nervous. By that time quarantine signs had been tacked up everywhere. Two truckloads of hard-faced men, wearing hunting jackets and carrying shotguns, arrived to form a ring around the town to prevent anyone from leaving. Roadblocks were set up. At a town meeting the chief of police informed everyone present that no word concerning the quarantine was to leak out. "Let's keep this little plague to ourselves, folks. No use in alarming the whole nation. Out of town phone calls will be screened, and all outgoing mail must be taken to the post office unsealed. All C.B. radios and other such equipment will be temporarily confiscated. Anyone attempting to signal persons from the outside world through the use of flares, drums, lights, mirrors, flags, or similar apparatus will be placed in custody. Now you all go home and pretend that this whole thing isn't even happening."

On the morning of the third day, men with megaphones drove slowly through the streets in pickups shouting, "Bring out your pork! Bring out your pork!" Hams, sides of bacon, pork roasts, sausages, pickled pigs' feet, and other pork items were collected and stacked up in front of the courthouse. A crowd gathered. One of the professors at the high school began to pass out mimeo-

graphed copies of excerpts from Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*. At a sign from Mayor Waldo Beam, two men wearing gas masks and carrying torches stepped forward and set the mountain of pork on fire.

As the greasy black smoke began to settle on everything, there were frightened whispers among the onlookers. Some nameless disease had entered the town. A plague whose virulence could only be guessed was at this very moment seeping into the nostrils and throats of worthy citizens. Suddenly a man broke loose from the crowd and bolted into the nearby drugstore. Others followed, and soon the store was choked with frenzied customers. Within minutes, the last box of Alka-Seltzer Plus was gone from the shelves. Panic reigned.

But as the days went by something odd happened, or rather, didn't happen. No one died. Aside from two or three cases of hysterical plague, no one even grew sick. Soon fear turned to hope, and hope turned to suspicion. At the end of the third week of quarantine, the town's attitude was well summed up by Gus Hauber, owner of the local Survs-U-Rite gas station.

"Something foul and fishy is afoot, my friends," said Gus at an impromptu town meeting. Gus had taken a course in public speaking and was happy for this opportunity. "You know what I had for breakfast? Eggs and liver. Know what I had for lunch? A tongue and cheese sandwich. Know what I'm going to have for supper? It won't be pork, friends. It will not be pork. And you know why? Someone does not want us to have pork. Someone powerful, someone rich. And who could that be? Does his name begin with an 'S' and rhyme with 'wine'? I believe it does. And I further believe that this person wants something from this town. We must find out what he wants or have our tastebuds yanked from our throats."

And the citizens of Hocksborg fought back their resentment for a man whose power they could not hope to overcome. They determined to give in. The chief of police was entrusted with a message to be delivered to Swine Swinberg. The message read, "We want freedom, we want pork. What do you want?"

All during the quarantine Swine Swinberg sat apart in his limestone mansion, waiting. He sat with his feet on the coffee table, cracking pistachio nuts and perusing a well thumbed copy of *The Adventures of Jim Bowie*. He knew the town would give in. He was in no hurry. He had both time and money. But when Aldous Druff delivered the town's message, Swine could not conceal his joy. He

threw his hat into the air and made the courtyard ring with a lusty hog call. Aldous was invited in for some "special cider I have been keepin' in the attic since the day Hawaii became a state." And the quarantine was lifted immediately.

"A statue." Swine was speaking to a delegation of townspeople in the Court House. The quarantine had been lifted several days before, and a salted hog had been sent to every family in Hockborg. Now it was Swine's turn to receive a gift. "A statue would be a real nice way for folks of Hocksborg to honor a citizen of my longstanding beneficence." He had been practicing this little speech for two days. "Nothin' fancy, mind. But bronze, and noble, and big. Right out in the middle of Main Street, so's folks will have to drive around it. I think somethin' like Cellini might have done. With me standin' there holdin' a sword. And wearing a cape maybe. And there should be a place where you could stick a flag on the Fourth of July and Pearl Harbor Day and such. Now, you folks take your time at it. Don't spend too much money, neither. But make it nice. Make it nice."

So the town took up a collection and had a bake sale, and a raffle and a dog race. And many people donated items of tin or copper for the bronze. A sculptor was brought in all the way from Boise. And after several sittings, and feverish labor on the part of the sculptor and various local craftsmen, the statue was finished.

The unveiling ceremony took place on a Sunday so that everyone could attend. Main Street was decorated with banners. People lined the sidewalks. Some hung out of store windows while others crowded as close to the statue as the retaining ropes would allow. There were shouts and laughter, whistles and fireworks, and a fight or two. Someone was selling rubbery hot dogs, and leaky snow cones dripped on people's best shoes. The mayor stepped onto a wooden platform and asked for quiet. People quit talking. Mothers hissed at their children to "settle down this instant or I'll take you home." Several people cleared their throats as if they were about to make a speech.

But it was the mayor who did the talking. He was dressed in a carefully pressed black suit with dog hairs on the pants cuffs. His speech touched on hogs, statues, leading citizens. He even made reference to Hernando DeSoto and Lewis and Clark. When he quit speaking, there was polite applause. Then Swine stepped onto the platform. The mayor presented him with a plywood "key to the



city" sprayed an uneven gold, and Swine mumbled a few self-conscious words of thanks.

A loudspeaker mounted on a pole crackled, and the rousing strains of "Semper Fidelis" filled the air. Then silence, and finally a drumroll. Someone pulled a cord, and the red, white, and blue cloth that covered the statue slid away. Or almost. It got caught on something, and a little kid had to climb up and tug it free. And there it stood. A twelve foot high statue of Swine Swinborg. The figure was standing tall and straight. One hand held a sword aloft while the other rested kindly on the head of a dignified bronze hog. A long cape was draped over the noble shoulders, and on the figure's head a plumed hat was tilted at a rakish angle. From the crown of the hat protruded a small flag, drooping in the still air. The sun glinted off the new-cast metal with such intensity that it looked as if no one's pictures would turn out.

There was an awed silence, then applause. As the noise quieted down, Swine walked over to his likeness and imitated its pose. There was a smile of smug triumph on his face. A smile that froze, then faded, and finally became a dark frown. From the roof of Sampson's Boutique came a shrill, childish taunt.

"Soo-ee! Soo-ee! Soo-ee!"

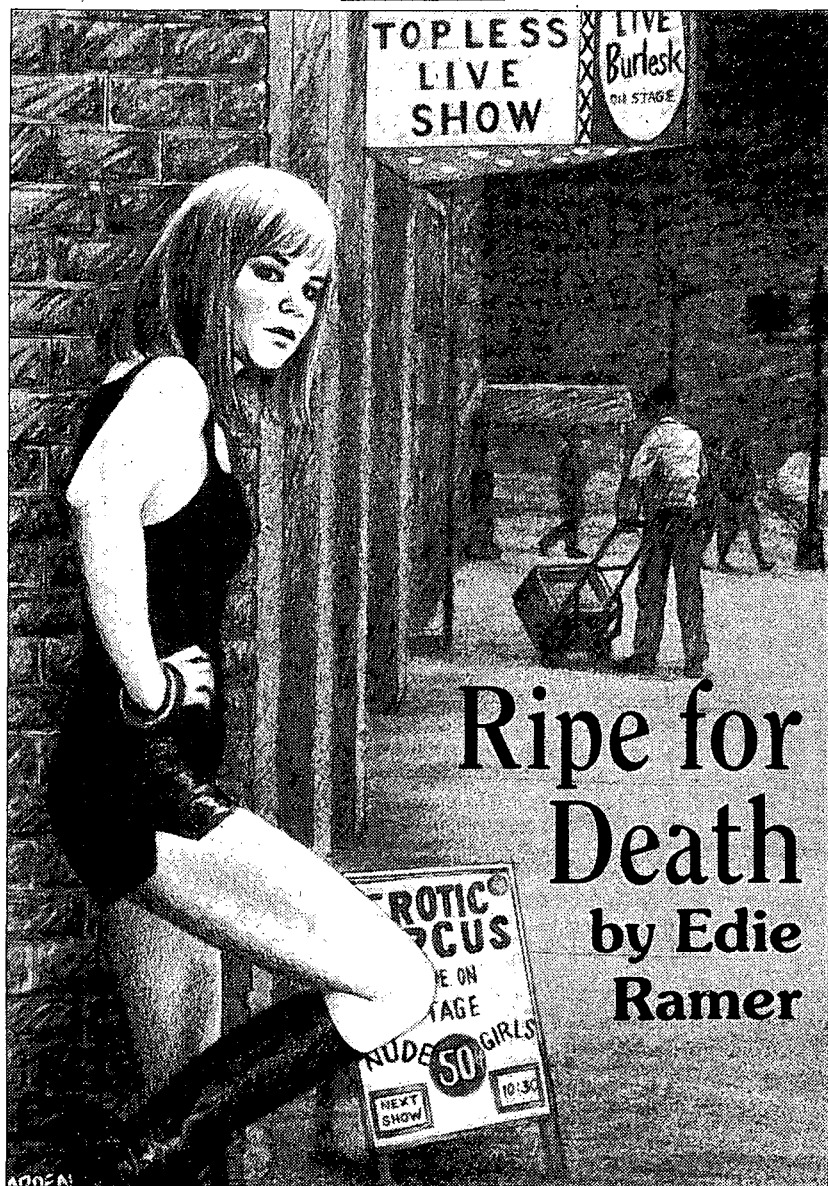
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mystery short story, though not his first published story—the six or seven others, he tells us, are "mostly outdoor stuff." He is chief of police in Savanna, Illinois, has been in law enforce-

ment for twenty-three years, is a Vietnam vet, grew up on a farm, and has written a number of nonfiction pieces for fishing and hunting magazines. We are glad to have him with us, and enjoyed his story a lot.

FICTION



# Ripe for Death

by Edie Ramer

Illustration by Laurie Harden

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Cars cruised the three-block avenue, the drivers looking over the working girls as if they were fruit to be picked. Was this one ripe enough? Or was she over-ripe? Was that one the wrong color? Did she look juicy enough? Did she look rotten to the core?

Some men liked them rotten. Some hated them—or hated themselves. The more self-hate, the more they needed dirty love. One man hated himself enough to have killed four hookers last month in the city of Besterfield, Florida.

My captain had picked me to join the ranks of the hookers because he thought that I looked like a peach.

“Bait for johns,” defense lawyers called cops posing as hookers.

I called it psycho bait.

My partner sat in a dented Plymouth in front of the bar two buildings down, as if he were waiting for someone to get out. I’d been working Hooker Street with Preacher for three nights now. He was big and black and I should’ve felt protected, but he scared me more than the johns did.

“The Lord is taking them home to purify them, the way he did the Magdalene,” he said about the murdered women on our first night together.

I’d known male cops who despised women, but Preacher was the first to be my partner. I’d thought about Captain Rogers and my mouth thinned.

“You’re not a sacrificial goat, Kallie,” Captain Rogers told me. “You do the usual thing. You and Preacher bring in the johns. We’ll look them up for priors. I know I promised you no more hooker duty, but we need names. Damn it, the whole city’s terrified.”

That made me laugh. “Half the city believes the four hookers deserved what they got.”

“Amen,” Preacher mumbled under his breath, too low for the captain to hear.

“That leaves one half who does give a damn,” Captain Rogers snapped.

“They only care for the titillation value.”

The captain’s jowls puffed out. “Well, I care. And if I care, the men and women under me care. That includes the two of you. You hear me?”

“Like the voice of God,” I said.

Preacher nodded his huge head, but he glowered at me out of his black-brown eyes. The captain held me back, telling Preacher I’d be with him in a moment.

He rubbed his hand over his double chin, taking his time

speaking. "Jeez, Kallie, usually I gotta warn the guys to watch what they say when I put them with the girls. Preacher's a good cop, but he's got this thing about using God's name in vain."

"For Christ's sake," I said.

"That, too." He shrugged. "Just watch it, okay? You'll be a good team."

Jennifer Gray, the first victim, was found in an alley on Seventh Avenue with her throat cut. She was seventeen and looked it, despite a crack addiction that kept her five foot five frame down to ninety pounds. In her death pictures, her eyes were blue and open wide. White-blond hair spilled over garbage from an overturned dumpster. Her face was pale, as it had been in life. Instead of getting a tan like other girls her age, she'd been searching for her next hit. She lived in a one-bedroom apartment with two equally pale-faced girls and one pale-faced boy. They were ghost children. When the homicide detective traced Jennifer's mother to a trailer court outside of the city, the mother had looked at the detective and said with satisfaction, "I told her she'd end up dead if she left me."

\*

Four weeks later the girls on Hooker Street stuck together in twos and threes, as if that would protect them when they drove off by themselves with strangers. I stood alone. You'd think that would've clued the johns. But perhaps the men saw me as vulnerable. Or maybe they were embarrassed to approach more than one hooker at a time. Or maybe, like Captain Rogers, they thought I was a peach.

Gloria was working the next block down. Between the two of us, we'd bagged twenty-three johns in two nights. Fourteen of them were mine. "They like white meat better," Gloria told me in the parking lot before we set out. Her bronze skin gleamed above and below the strapless red dress that was designed to display the hills and valleys of her body.

My low-cut top exposed mounds instead of hills. I grinned. "You're just jealous."

"Vanity is woman," Preacher's deep voice made Gloria and me start.

She swept him a piercing look. "A woman created you, brother. Without us, you'd be air. Dirty air at that."

"God made woman out of man's rib."

"And that's some damn good magic." Gloria's partner winked.

Gloria laughed and slid into their car. I wished I were going with them.

Aurora Chan had been a dancer at one time. Slim and smooth (another peach), she looked closer to thirty-two than forty-two. The daughter that Aurora was putting through medical school thought Aurora worked as a choreographer at a nightclub on Besterfield's east side. When the detectives checked with the club owner, he told them Aurora had been fired three years ago. Later, the detectives discovered Aurora had been the owner's mistress for twelve years. When he'd found a new girlfriend, he kicked Aurora out of her job as well as his bed.

That never got into the papers. Channel 3 had filmed Aurora's funeral, cameras zooming in on the distraught daughter. Behind her weeping figure had been a tall, balding man, his arm linked to a brunette woman with a long nose. That was the ex-boss and his wife. They were paying their respects.

A Jeep with rebel plates in the front pulled up to the curb. I put my hand on my hip and flashed a smile. "Hey, honey, you lonely tonight? I'm the best

company around this little ole town."

The interior was dark. The man's face was in shadow. The street light caught a flash of silver. I glanced over at the Plymouth for reassurance, then back to the john. The flash turned into a flame—a cigarette lighter. The john leaned toward me, cigarette smoke blowing out of his nostrils.

"Company ain't what I need."

I crossed my arms over the open window of his passenger door. "Whatever you need, I can give it."

"For a price, huh?"

"Supply and demand." I made my voice low and, I hoped, sexy. "You demand, I supply."

"You got a deal."

I flipped open my shield. "Not the deal you wanted, I'm afraid."

He swore, but didn't try to speed away. In a moment, Preacher had the john out of the Jeep and was reading him his rights. All the while, the john glared at me out of his pockmarked face.

"Women are the devil's tool," he said.

Preacher cuffed the john's hands. "Eve let loose the snake in Eden. Beware of her when she holds out the apple."

A chill crawled up my backbone. We drove to the station in

chilling silence. Leaving Preacher to book the john, I marched into Captain Rogers' office.

"I won't work with Preacher any more," I said. "If Preacher met the Slasher, he'd probably tell him he's doing a good job and let the bastard walk."

Captain Rogers looked up from papers spread over a green blotter, his jowls puffing in and out like fish gills. "Damnit, Kallie, I don't have time to nurse your feminine sensibilities."

Every muscle in my body tightened. "That's it. I'm complaining to the union tomorrow morning."

"Don't second-guess me, officer." He wadded up the top sheet of paper, hurling it into his metal wastebasket. "I'm the captain. None of my men tell me what to do, no matter what their sex."

"It's because of my sex that I'm making this complaint. Excuse me." I swiveled on my three-inch heels. "I'm going home sick. I suddenly want to throw up."

My shoes tapped out a retreat on the linoleum. Behind me, Captain Rogers' fist slammed against his desktop.

Gloria and her fresh-faced partner were bringing in a balding Caucasian, probably

someone's husband. I gestured to Gloria to come over.

"I won't work with Preacher any more," I told her. "I'm making a formal complaint. Will you vouch for me?"

She stepped back. "I don't know. Preacher's a brother."

"And I'm a sister."

"You are?" She put out her hand so that the back of our wrists touched. Her mahogany flesh made my light tan look ghost-colored. "Not in the skin. Not in the soul."

"Your soul's the same shade as mine," I snapped. "Because it's encased in a female body, to Preacher it's just as tainted and carries the same stink."

The curve of her full mouth turned down. "I'm sorry, Kallie. We black women got to start standing by our men. They're beginning to disappear on us."

"Tell that to Sherraine Brown."

Sherraine, the Slasher's third victim, had skin the color of maple syrup. On Hooker Street, she'd been known as Sherry Dark. She'd been a dancer, too, the kind that didn't need twelve years of training. Sherraine had been a big woman, with a forty-two DD bust and hips that would never be mistaken for a boy's. She'd done well in the exotic dance



circuit until she began falling down during the act—another sucker discovering alcohol and drugs made lousy dancing partners.

Her sister said Sherraine had been in AA for two months and planned to quit the streets as soon as she lined up another dancing gig. Sherraine had gone to church on the morning of the day she'd been killed. She'd told her sister that she'd had a vision of God. But when she'd been found in the abandoned warehouse, her mouth was open in the middle of a scream and the white of her eyes showed. She looked as if she'd died seeing the devil.

I frowned at Gloria. "The brothers aren't disappearing anywhere near as fast as the sisters are. Just ask the girls on Hooker Street. Ask Sherraine Brown's family."

A snort separated us. A thin man with curly dark hair slammed through, acting as if we weren't there. The angle of his head showed contempt.

Gloria's nostrils flared. I didn't bother wasting that much expression on Annuzio. He'd been at the desk and out of my way for the six years I'd been stationed at the second precinct. Annuzio's dislike of women cops wasn't my problem; Preacher's was.

"I'm sorry," Gloria said and turned away.

My shoulders slumped as I left the building. The police station had smelled of unwashed criminals. Outside, the air smelled unwashed, too. I drove to the pseudo-chalet in its wooded lot that I shared with a sixtyish woman whose husband had died a year ago—about the same time my husband took off with his ex-girlfriend. Elaine and I were both going through a grieving process of sorts.

While I worked, Elaine babysat for Mitchell, my nine-month-old son. Sometimes, when I felt bitter over my ex-husband—and I felt bitter a lot—I thought that finding Elaine made up for it. Paul hadn't been much of a husband. My son was going to be twice the man his father was.

"You're back early." Elaine looked up from the twenty-seven-inch TV screen where Jay Leno grinned while the audience roared with laughter. "Mitch is sleeping like a baby."

"Mitch is a baby." I fell into a cushioned rattan chair. "I walked out. I was working with Preacher again and couldn't take it any more."

Elaine shook her head. "If you ask me, he's the one they should be checking on. He sounds like a real weirdo."



I smiled. Elaine was the prototype for Mrs. Santa, complete with reading glasses. She'd never worked out of her home in her life, and in her innocence had no idea what women trying to earn a living had to put up with. "Tomorrow I'm filing a complaint with the union. I don't have to take this crap. Especially now."

"You tell 'em," Elaine said, her attention half on the TV screen where Leno was holding up a photo of a mislettered traffic sign.

I pushed out of the chair and went to check on Mitch. He slept on his stomach, his diapered rear up, the blanket fallen to the side of his crib. I pulled the blanket over his shoulders, although I knew he would slough it off again in his sleep. Mitch had the softest and hottest skin, shedding heat like a tiny furnace. His dad had been that way, too. Always warm. Now, me, I was more coldblooded. I could be as cold as they come.

Jean Porter had come to the Sunshine State from Ohio three years ago with her husband. She'd been tall and bony, with red-blond hair and freckles. In the death pictures, it had been hard to distinguish the freckles from splashes of blood.

Her murder, the last, haunted me. The husband who had torn her from her close farming family had abandoned her when she was pregnant—two days before my husband left me. Exactly one week after I had Mitch in St. Joseph's, she had her son in St. Joseph's. She'd started back at her receptionist job a week before I'd started back at the precinct.

That was pretty much where our similarities ended. My salary as a cop paid double what Jean got from the insurance company. And my ex was paying support. Hers had disappeared with every cent they owned, cleaning out the change in her purse. Last week Homicide had found him in Miami living with another woman. To support her baby and herself, Jean had turned to the one part-time job that paid equally for women and men.

The teenage girl in the apartment below said that she'd babysat Jean's son for only the last three Friday nights. That tallied with what the other girls on Hooker Street said. On Jean's dresser, Homicide found a half-finished letter to her mother. Jean was asking for money to come home.

She made it home two days ago—in a casket. Her parents took the baby. That's when I be-

gan wondering what would happen to Mitch if I died. My adopted parents were dead. Paul had never even visited Mitch, as if he were trying to forget he had been married to me.

He didn't deserve Mitch.

Good thing I didn't plan to die anytime soon. But that's probably what Jean Porter had thought.

**A**fter warning me that no other guy was going to want to hook up with me, the union rep took my complaint. I had the feeling that he did so only because it wasn't the politically correct time for the police union to refuse to support a female officer. Lounging in his Naugahyde chair with his shirtsleeves rolled up, he spoke two sentences during the twenty minutes I filled out the forms, giving me the first taste of what to expect.

I went to work that night filled with dread—and determination. Nothing could stop me from doing what I felt was right. Regardless of gender, all cops have a stubborn streak. Backing down gracefully just isn't something we do well.

Annuzio, who exemplified the stubborn male, was leaving the station house as I was coming in. He jumped back as if I

carried a contagious disease. When I walked into the squad room, a few of the other guys averted their eyes. Preacher, at the water cooler in the corner, glared at me. Maybe I did carry some kind of contagious disease after all. It was called Being Fed Up With Taking Crap.

Captain Rogers appeared at the door to his office and called me inside. "You got a new partner." He stomped around his desk and thumped into his chair. "You happy now?"

"Delirious," I said.

"Hey, you got what you wanted."

"What I want is creeps like Preacher off the force. What I want is creeps like Preacher off the face of this earth. He's no better than the Slasher."

Rogers' jowls puffed out. "He's not that bad."

"Yeah, you tell that to one of the other women cops around here."

"I did. To Gloria. She's working with him now. You got Bill Haslock. Any complaints?"

I shook my head and went to find Bill. Gloria came out of the ladies' room, her purple dress picking up bronze highlights in her skin. She made a face at me.

"Thanks a lot, Kallie."

"You said he's your brother."

"So he is," she said, walking past me with her head held high.

I held my head high, too, even though Bill Haslock looked me up and down in my hooker's short skirt and shorter top and let out a whistle that would've made a construction worker jealous. Then he slapped the side of his head.

"You're not going to write me up for harassment, are you?"

Bill and I had been rookies together. He and his girlfriend had helped me move after my divorce. I gave him a dirty look.

"Not you, too."

"A guy can't be too careful," he said. "It's getting damn hard to be a man nowadays. One wrong word and you may as well kiss your job goodbye."

I kept my mouth shut. Women were being killed, but the men were worried that their butts might get kicked. As always, wasn't that the most important thing?

The word of the sweep had finally gotten through. I only got one john that night. Gloria bagged two. We met in the ladies' at the end of the shift.

"Boring night," she said, slathering makeup remover on purple-spangled eyelids. "Preacher's not that hard to handle. Why'n't you just tell him to keep his trap shut or you'll cram your wig into it? That's what I did and he was fine as silk."

My comb caught in my gel-coated hair. I jerked it through, pulling out a few brown strands by their roots. Wincing, I said, "Probably because I'm not wearing a wig."

"It's not a joke. You've never been a black man without a job."

"That's right. I'm a woman and so are you. I don't have to put up with hatred from my partner."

Gloria sighed and turned from the mirror. "The john with the Jeep that you pulled in the other night stopped by me. He must've remembered me from the station, 'cause he took one good look and was gone."

"Could be the john didn't like what he saw."

"That's impossible." She slugged me on my arm and laughed.

I was glad that we parted friends. At ten A.M. the next morning, the doorbell rang as I changed Mitch's diapers. He kicked his legs and chewed the head of his stuffed pony.

Elaine's voice rose in the front room. A moment later, she appeared in the doorway of Mitch's room. "It's for you," she said, her voice higher than usual. "Two detectives."

"What is it?" I lifted Mitch to my breast. My heart beat fast, picking up signals of distress as

if Elaine were broadcasting them on a radio.

"Your friend's dead. That lady police officer."

"Gloria?" My mind fuzzed out on me for an instant; I shook my head. "The Slasher?"

Elaine nodded. "They want to talk to you."

My arms tightened. Mitch squealed. I loosened my hold. He pulled a strand of hair, but I didn't protest. I needed him right now more than he needed me. Walking to the living room, I held him close against my heart.

Detective Art Frank introduced me to his partner, a big blond named Dick Chadbourne who looked as if he would be more at home on a golf course than kneeling over dead bodies.

"Kallie and I worked together in Domestic," Art told Chadbourne, then turned to me. "Bet you're glad you're out of that."

I nodded over Mitch's head. No cop likes being assigned to Domestic Crime. I could stomach the bruised women and their bleeding husbands. I could even stomach the abused partner turning on us, the ones who'd come to save them, in a flicker of an eye. It had been the children who'd made me sick at heart. They were either silent wraiths or angry and sullen. Shadow children. We all

knew—cops, children, and parents—that the abuse would start again the moment we left. I'd rather do hooker duty any day.

Mitch began squirming, his bare feet kicking into my ribs. I lowered him to the carpet in front of his Mickey Mouse busy box. He ignored it, lifting his chubby hand toward Art and babbling.

"Congratulations on your promotion," I said.

Art grinned. "Congratulations on your baby. The divorce, too. Ready to go out with me yet? See, the kid loves me already." Wiggling his thick eyebrows, he bent down to shake Mitch's hand.

I sat on the couch. "No, thanks. I don't go out with married men. Call me old fashioned."

"I wouldn't call you that." This time he wiggled his eyebrows at me. "I don't go out with married men either."

I smiled briefly. Art stood, his face sobering, and came to sit on the couch cushion next to me.

"You want to tell me everything about Officer Chandor?"

"How'd she die?"

Art put his hand on my knee. There was nothing sexual about the gesture, but I wasn't ready to be comforted. I moved

my leg, and his hand fell to the couch.

"Her neck was slashed." Chadbourne pulled the rattan chair close to the couch and leaned forward. "Same M.O. as the Slasher. She was found this morning in the alley behind her apartment building."

Two months ago I'd picked Gloria up when her car wouldn't start. She'd introduced me to her mother and her ten-year-old daughter. They shared the mother's two-bedroom apartment while Gloria saved money to buy a house.

"Kallie." Art inched closer to me. "You have to tell us everything and anything you can think of."

Mitch punched the Bugs Bunny on the busy box. There was a whirring sound and a distorted, "What's up, doc?" I looked from Mitch to Art's thin, serious face.

"I'll tell you all I know. But why are you asking me these questions?"

"Don't you get it?" Art's eyes slid away from mine. "There's a good chance Gloria's killer knew she was a cop. And if he knew she was a cop and killed her . . . well, you and she were working Hooker Street together. He could know about you, too."

"What Art's trying to say," Chadbourne drawled, "is that you might be next."

On the rug, Mitch squealed, looking up at me with big blue eyes. I shook my head. No, I couldn't die. I had to take care of my baby.

**"P**reacher's suspended with pay, pending further investigation,"

Captain Rogers told me.

"You think he's the Slasher?"

Captain Rogers shook his head, his brow creasing more than its usual two dozen lines. He was getting old fast.

"I'm taking you off hooker duty."

"What about that john I took in the other day? Ryan Cook." I'd looked him up in my notebook. "Gloria thought she saw him again last night."

"You tell this to Homicide? Then it ain't your problem or mine. For the rest of the week, you and Bill are assigned to the Gang Crime Unit."

I leaned over my desk. "Can't I help with Gloria's murder? She was my friend."

Rogers glared at me. "We don't need anyone with a guilt complex messing up a major homicide investigation."

"I don't feel guilty. Why should I?"

"Because you're alive. And Gloria's not. You can go now."

As I left, he bent over his papers. I wondered just who was

feeling guilty because Gloria would never see another sunset, never tuck her daughter into bed at night, never sashay into the station in her high-heeled boots and wink at him in his office.

Never share the ladies' room with me.

The attitude in the station had changed since last night. No one snubbed me tonight. Annuzio even offered me a doughnut, his ultimate olive branch. I told him I wasn't hungry.

Bill and I flipped a coin. I lost and began driving the two-year-old Chevy Caprice to a fast food restaurant where gang members hung out. Bill asked if I thought Preacher killed Gloria and the other women.

"You know as much as I do," I said, steering around a double-parked car.

"I don't think he did."

"You don't want to think he did it."

"He's one of us. You know his wife left him last month."

"My husband left me, too. Holding the baby at that. You don't see me sticking a knife into every man I meet."

I half expected him to come back with a wisecrack, but there were only the sounds of traffic outside and the crack-

ling on the radio inside. It was a moment before he spoke.

"Preacher's wife doesn't live too far away from here. Maybe we can drop in."

"How'd you get her address?"

"The computer. Hang a left at the next light."

"We'll get in trouble."

"Turn left," he said.

I turned.

The name on the mailbox said Twyla Johnson. No one answered the buzzer. A woman wearing an outfit similar to the one I'd worn last night came out the locked doors. Flashing his shield, Bill stopped her. She looked as if she'd rather spit than talk to a cop, but it took us only a minute to get her singing. After all, we weren't asking about her activities, lawful or otherwise. And we might be able to return the favor some day.

Who knew? Maybe we would.

She stepped back into the doorway, sheltering from a cooling wind that separated the curls of her blonde wig and raised goosebumps on her pushed-up cleavage.

"Twyla's a dancer." Something she saw in our faces made her stiffen. "She's legit. The real thing. A nice lady, even if her old man's a cop."

I looked at Bill. Another dancer?

"You know Preacher?" he asked the woman.

Her wide nostrils pinched together as if she smelled something bad. "I know Preacher's daddy. He runs a storefront church down the Center. Got a real hate against the girls in the business. You know, it makes a body wonder why."

"Where's Twyla now?" Bill asked.

She shrugged. "My guess is she's at her aunt's house. She split right after your buddies finished with her this afternoon. Why'n't you ask them?"

Bill and I looked at each other. The woman laughed and strutted past us, her three-inch heels clicking on the concrete. Bill shrugged.

"Guess it's true what they say about brilliant minds thinking alike. May as well wing it over to the White Hen. Things don't look good for Preacher."

We made it to the White Hen in time to break up a gang fight before anyone ended up bleeding over the parking lot. Before the wagon came, Bill and I confiscated ten knives, four handguns, and one Uzi from seven juveniles, aged twelve through seventeen, and two eighteen-year-olds. The juvies would be out as soon as their parents came; the eighteen-year-olds

would be on the streets to fight again the next day.

"This ain't a job for a woman," Bill said, typing his report on the next desk. "It ain't a job for a man, either."

I didn't answer.

After turning in the reports, Bill and I went out again. This time he drove while I thought. The Uzi had scared me. Being a stalking horse for the Slasher had scared me. I was only twenty-nine. Surely there was another job I could do that could support me and Mitch.

"Hey!" I first noticed we were heading toward the suburbs. "Where are we going?"

"Your john—Ryan Cook—lives out here."

"He's not my john. Anyway, Homicide probably turned him inside out hours ago."

"Probably," Bill said, but he kept on going the wrong way.

I shut up. This was my battle he was fighting. I had no choice but to back him.

Bill pulled up in front of a small ranch house that Cook shared with his parents. A light glowed yellow in the crack between drawn curtains. A white coupe squatted on a concrete slab behind the house. The second spot was empty.

"Doesn't look like he's home. Why don't we try Preacher's house?"



I shrugged, fatalistic. I was at the I-don't-care point in my career anyway, and it seemed as if Bill felt the same. Hell, we could always get jobs as security guards at some department store. The way the city administrators whined about cop salaries—at the same time voting themselves hefty raises—collaring shoplifters at K Mart might pay more in the long run.

Preacher lived above his parents in a duplex a mile from Hooker Street. Both women-haters living with their parents had to mean something. I wondered if Homicide had caught that on the Slasher's psychological profile.

"His car's gone, too."

I nodded. Preacher owned a fifteen-year-old Volkswagen. Every time he squeezed his linebacker body behind the wheel, the front end sank a foot. Some of the guys had a running bet on when the springs would go. No one had ever asked me to join the Volkswagen pool. Maybe it was male only.

"May as well get to work," Bill said.

The rest of our shift was quiet. We split up outside the locker room. I finished up first. Bill caught up with me as I was leaving the building.

"I'll follow you home," he said.

I gave him an angry look. "Bill, I'm a cop. A good one. I don't need protection."

He followed me into the lit parking lot. "That's probably the same thing Gloria thought."

Despite the lights, shadows moved eerily. I shivered. "I'm forewarned. Gloria wasn't."

"If you're not scared, you're stupid," he said.

I reached my car and checked that no one was crouched in the back. "I'm not stupid, but I can't hide. Besides, the Slasher struck last night. It doesn't fit the pattern for him to kill again tonight. Go home."

He sighed. "That's what all the girls tell me."

As I drove, I checked the mirrors every five minutes. Nobody followed me. Not Bill's Ford Escort, not Ryan Cook's Jeep, not Preacher's Volkswagen.

The lights were off at the house in the woods. When I had first come in answer to Elaine's ad, I'd thought of Little Red Riding Hood. And Elaine could've modeled for Red's grandma. I'd fallen in love with the chalet and with Elaine and with the woods. But tonight it seemed too lonely. The wind had died down, and the woods were quiet. The trees didn't even rustle with the secret movements of night animals.

The sky was inky, clouds covering the quarter moon. The smell of something rotten permeated the air.

I told myself it was just a dead animal in the woods.

My strides quickened to the door. Inside, Elaine and Mitch would be asleep. At least I always half-hoped Mitch would be asleep, giving me time to feel like a human again—a mommy—before I was ready to pick him up and kiss his drooling mouth and hear the gurgle that he made knowing his mommy loved him and was good to him. And when Mommy wasn't there, he had Elaine to feed him, change him, play with him, and cuddle him. Life could be heaven when you were nine months old. Or it could be hell.

The grandfather clock in the hall ticktocked. The refrigerator motor clanked. A wall creaked. I threw my purse on the living room couch and flipped on the lights. Everything looked the same, but something was wrong. The house felt deserted, empty of breathing beings. The hair on my arms raised. I sensed evil.

"Mitch," I whispered. For a moment I stood frozen, then my muscles unlocked. I sprinted to Mitch's room in the back of the house, the hall runner muffling my footsteps.

As I ran, I denied my feelings of danger. The Slasher had killed last night; he wouldn't strike again so soon. Besides, he only killed hookers, not babies or elderly women. I flung open Mitch's door, slamming it against the wall. The hall light illuminated half the room, leaving Mitch's crib in darkness. I rushed to the crib and leaned over.

The blanket was pushed aside. Mitch—my baby—was gone.

"Elaine!"

Her bedroom was upstairs. My tennis shoes thumped up the freestanding staircase. My heartbeat pulsed in my throat and thrummed in my ears. My hand felt nerveless on the smooth banister.

"Elaine!" I burst into her room. The Hollywood bed was empty, the ruby bedspread smooth, undisturbed.

From the kitchen came the sound of breaking glass.

Terror filled me. Hate filled me. How dare he touch my baby? I'd find out where Mitch was, and then I'd kill the bastard. Kill him. Kill.

My gun was in my purse on the living room couch.

I darted for the stairs. As I reached the landing, a footstep sounded below. Without thought, I leaned over the banister. A long shadow, a carica-

ture of a man-monster, slanted across the oak floor between the living room and the kitchen. I hitched my rear onto the banister, swinging my feet over. I held my breath.

A leg, covered with blue cloth, and a shoe, black, moved into view. I braced my arms, my muscles tensed. A head, black and curly showed next. I jumped.

His shoulder and upper back broke my fall. He pitched forward. I rolled off him, my knees banging against the hardwood floor. Pain exploded in my kneecaps. I collapsed onto my side.

When the throbbing subsided, Annuzio was leaning over me. The knife in his hand flashed silver. Madness glinted in his eyes.

"Where's Mitch?" I demanded.

He smiled. "There's no one here but you and me. In a minute, it'll just be me."

"My baby! Where's my baby?"

"Who cares? I don't know what the hell you did with your kid, but I ain't no goddamned baby killer."

My fingers spread on the coolness of the floorboards. The heartbeats pounding in my ears receded. He didn't have Mitch. Mitch was okay. Somewhere.

All I had to do was to stay alive and find him.

From the back of my mind I dredged up remnants of lectures from training classes. Lesson Number One: Humor the guy with the knife.

"Why don't you tell me what's wrong, Annuzio?" To save my life, literally, I couldn't remember his first name. "You don't really want to do this. We can get you help."

He laughed, his canines gleaming. The big bad wolf had followed Red Riding Hood home after all. Fairy tales did come true. The bad ones.

"That's the problem with you bitches. You keep trying to tell your betters how to do their job. The captain wanted the prostitution stopped. I was just following orders."

"Gloria wasn't a prostitute. She was one of us."

His hand jerked forward. The knife slipped under my chin. My heartbeat pounded in my ears again, and his words seemed to come from across the room instead of spitting into my face.

"She was never one of us. Neither are you, 'cause you're both women. Both bitches. I almost picked her up last night. I know she saw me and was just waiting to knife me in the back. I had to stick it to her before she could do it to me. She didn't

leave me any choice. Just like you."

"You're sick. You need help."

"I didn't enjoy killing Gloria. But I'll enjoy killing you after the trouble you gave Preacher. You're a ball breaker, Kallie. A nutcracker. More than any other woman I've wasted, you deserve to die."

In the kitchen, glass crunched.

"Someone's here," I said.

He laughed. The knife pointed under my chin pierced my skin. "Say goodbye, Kallie. You're a dead woman."

I jerked my head away, rolled sideways on the floor, and leaped to a crouching position. My leg pumped out toward Annuzio's jaw. He jumped back.

"Bitch." He crouched, ready to spring at me.

I looked around for a weapon. Anything. But there was nothing.

A hissing sound alerted me. I danced away from his lunge. At the last second I kicked my foot out. He fell forward, turning around, on his feet and leaping toward—

Something exploded.

Something smashed between Annuzio's eyes. The force knocked him to the floor. Where there had been bone, blood gushed out. Annuzio jerked once, then became still. He lay there, his eyes open, his

fingers still locked around the knife handle. In death, he looked surprised.

"Kallie, you're bleeding." It was Bill's voice. I sagged. He caught my shoulders, steadying me against his chest.

Heavy footsteps came toward us. A big black man leaned over Annuzio, a gun aimed at Annuzio's heart.

"Preacher?" I asked.

"I spotted Preacher in the parking lot." Bill's chin brushed the top of my head as he talked. "He took another route to your house. I followed him. He waited for me at the next house down the road."

Preacher shoved his gun into the holster around his waist. "I seen him a mile away."

"Hey, I'm telling this story. Anyway, Preacher told me he thought you'd be next. So we snuck up here and waited for a few minutes. Then we saw the window in the back was broken, and we crawled in and—"

A car with a bad muffler puttered down the driveway.

"That's Elaine." I broke free from Bill's hold and ran out the front door as Elaine's Sundance reached the house.

She braked and pressed a button to open the passenger window. Below it, Mitch was slumped in the child's seat, his eyes closed.

"Darling," Elaine said in a loud whisper. "I hope you didn't worry. I thought sure I'd beat you home. My Sashi called. She had a car accident—no one was hurt, thank God—and needed me to pick her up. It took longer than I thought, but Mitch slept like an angel through the whole thing. The police questioned Sashi forever. You know how they are."

From behind me, Preacher said, "We know, lady, we know."

I opened the door and unhooked Mitch, lifting him into my arms. Warm and sleepy, he moved against my breast. He was real and alive and he mattered.

The man sprawled on the living room floor was real, but he

wasn't alive and he didn't matter. Not any more.

"Bill's calling the station," Preacher said.

Elaine drove to the carport in the back. I turned to Preacher.

"You saved my life," I said.

He shrugged his huge shoulders. "You might've gotten away if I'd waited. But I'm glad I didn't."

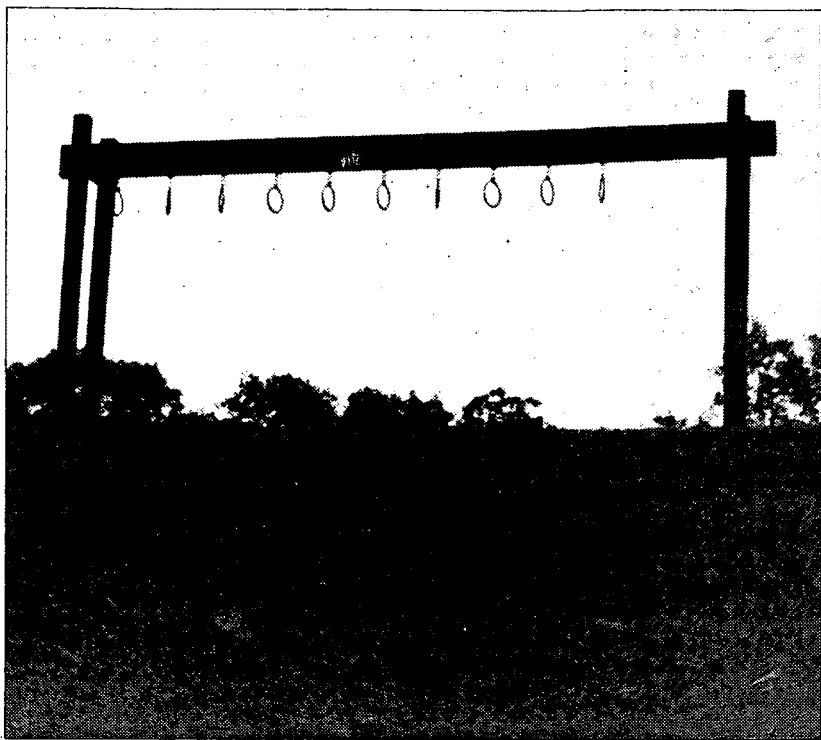
"For Gloria and all the other women," I said.

He shook his head. His face was unreadable in the darkness. "Once Internal exonerates me for burning Annuzio, this'll probably make me sergeant."

He turned and strode toward the house. I followed him. What else was there to say?

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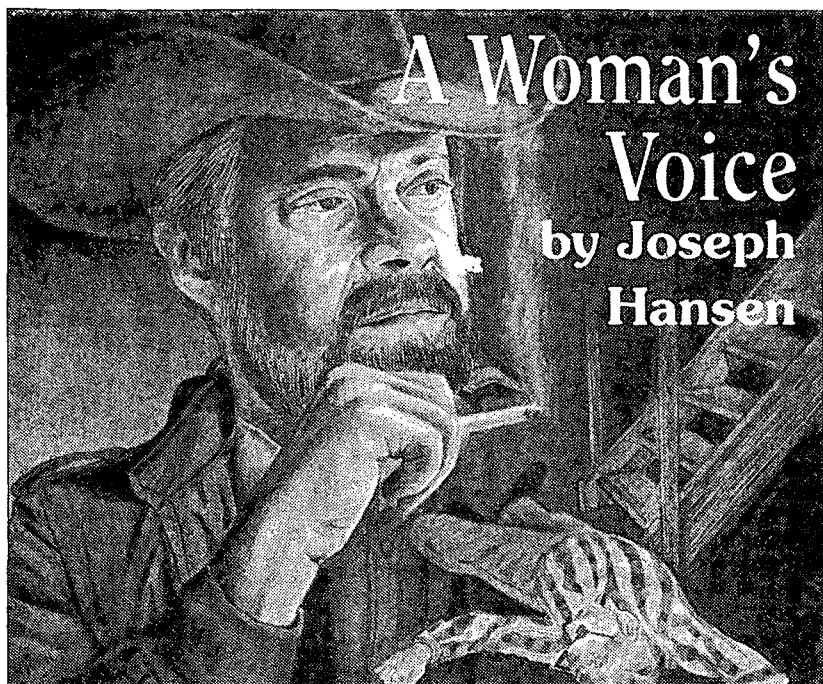
# THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



*Photo by Charles F. Walker*

Two down, ten to go. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1540 Broadway, New York, New York 10036. Please label your entry "September Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

The winning entry for the April Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 155.



**G**eorge Stubbs said, "Say, that writer feller died—the one that hired you that time to find his daughter."

"Charles Herkimer?" Hack Bohannon said.

"That's him. Fell downstairs and cracked his skull."

It was a sunny morning at the stables up Rodd Canyon, on California's central coast. The breeze through the windows of the plank-walled kitchen carried the tang of sage and eucalyptus. Bohannon stood at the

range fixing flapjacks, eggs, and bacon. Stubbs, stocky, white-whiskered, once long ago a rodeo rider, sat at the table drinking coffee, rattling the morning paper in gnarled hands. "Says here Herkimer was Madrone's most famous citizen."

Bohannon snorted. "He never thought so." He scooped the pancakes off the griddle and onto plates. "Worked hard all his life. Published two dozen novels. The critics praised them. But other writers got the



money, the fame, the prizes." He laid bacon and fried eggs on the plates and took the plates to the table. "All he ended up with was bitterness."

"You told me at the time." Stubbs laid aside the newspaper, took the plate from Bohannon, and set it down. "Some men think they have to win it all or they've failed." He tucked a napkin in at the collar of his faded plaid shirt and reached for the butter. "I read that last book of his a few years back. 'Course, he made up the people, but he got the measure of this place—the ocean, the canyons, Madrone, Settlers Cove. Got it down perfect. He could make pictures with words good as any artist. Like to have shook his hand, but he never came here."

"No, I went to him." Bohannon set his plate down, drew out a chair, sat himself down. "He was in the hospital when he sent for me. Prostate surgery. It was successful, there was no malignancy, but he was having somber thoughts, and he asked me to find his long-lost daughter. What was her name? Beatrice. Herkimer wanted to reconcile with his only child before he died."

"Only she was having thoughts—" Stubbs tilted the syrup bottle over his pancakes "—of another kind."

"Leave a little for me," Bohannon said. "All that sugar will rot your teeth."

"Not mine." Stubbs passed him the bottle. "Store bought." He grinned to show them off. "Lifetime guarantee."

Bohannon poured the remaining trickle of syrup onto his flapjacks and ate in silence, remembering. Herkimer was a gray, rumpled, homely man of sixty-five, wearing glasses mended at the hinges with paperclips. Nothing you'd call writerly about him. Except for the precise way he spoke, always in complete sentences, never a word misplaced or mispronounced. Propped against pillows in his hospital bed, surrounded by books and magazines, he answered Bohannon's praise of his last book grumpily.

"It didn't sell worth a damn. But then, none of my books ever did. See, Bohannon, I never understood the importance of the fame game—not until too late. I thought a writer's job was to write. I was a fool. A writer's job is to get out there in the spotlight, hobnob with the rich and famous, get booked on all the TV talk shows, pass out from drink and drugs before sixty million viewers, stab your wife at a literary cocktail party. Anything to get your name in

the paper. Writing? What's writing got to do with it?"

Bohannon pushed away his empty plate, swallowed some coffee, lit a cigarette. He hadn't answered. He privately thought Herkimer'd had a fair shake. He'd earned enough to retire on. Maybe his books weren't bestsellers, but they were respected, and even though he'd stopped writing, they still seemed to sell. Bohannon didn't think Charles Herkimer had much cause to complain.

Bohannon had turned the conversation to the reason Herkimer had phoned him, the daughter he hadn't seen in twenty-odd years.

Herkimer said, "I want you to find her and tell her I'm truly sorry for whatever I did that sent her packing with never a word, then or since. I love her. I want her to be my friend again. Remind her that we were friends once, good friends. When she was a little girl. Bring her back to me, Bohannon. I want her to smile at me before I die."

"You're not dying," Bohannon said.

"I'm not getting any younger," Herkimer said.

**S**an Francisco is known for fog and rain, but whenever Bohannon went there, the sun

shone. It was that way on the day he found Herkimer's daughter, who didn't use her father's name. She called herself Beatrice Spencer.

"It was my mother's maiden name," she said.

She was short, wore no makeup, and had her hair cut to make her look like a boy. Only she was forty and too broad in the butt for the illusion to work. She wore jeans and a pullover sweater, sleeves pushed up to the elbows. She sat at a drafting table in a loft where sunlight poured down from skylights to make dazzling the whiteness of desks and cabinets, paint and carpeting. Wong's was a smart store. What it turned out were greeting cards. Also smart. Most of the samples on the walls were signed *Beatrice*.

"He lied to you, Mr. Bohannon," she said. "At the cemetery, after my mother's funeral, I told him in plain English the reason I was leaving. Because I wasn't going to live the way she'd lived, in his cold shadow, devoted as a nun, scurrying to attend to his every need, when all he cared about was one thing. His damned books."

"He claims he doesn't understand." She had brought Bohannon coffee in a Styrofoam cup stenciled with chipper stylized daisies. He drank some of

it. "He told me when you were little you had good times together."

"If I made the mistake of having a good time in his presence," she said sourly, "all it got me was, 'Will you be quiet? Daddy's trying to write.'" Perched, short-legged on a tall stool at that shiny white table, Beatrice shook her head and grimly laughed. "His friends are dying off, aren't they? The few he ever had time for. That's why he wants me back. Well, I watched my mother wither and die of loneliness, a bright, cheerful woman before his total self-absorption drained the life out of her. That's never going to happen to me. Not with any man. Certainly not with him."

On a triangular scrap of tag-board Bohannon wrote Herkimer's address and phone number. "If you won't go see him, at least write to him. Give him a call. He loves you."

She didn't give the note a glance. "Loves? He doesn't know the meaning of the word. There's only room in Charles Herkimer for one emotion. Ambition."

Bohannon let the note lie there. "I think he's learned now there's more to living."

She had picked up a brush and dipped it in a very small jar of red paint. She looked at him. "Ah?"

"Whatever he expected from life, he didn't get it," Bohannon said. "I have a hunch he figures sacrificing everything else to writing was a mistake, a waste."

"Feeling sorry for himself?" She bent and touched color into a delicately traced drawing push-pinned to the table. "That kind always do." She dabbled the brush in water, dried it on a paint-stained cloth. "The ones who can't feel sorry for anyone else." She grimaced. "Too bad, Mr. Bohannon. But I'm afraid you've wasted your time."

Bohannon shrugged. "I earned my pay. I found you."

"I didn't want to be found," she said. "Not by him."

Bohannon put on his weathered Stetson. "Is that what you want me to tell him?"

She studied him, tilting her head. "I want you to tell him you couldn't find me. But you won't do that, will you? You're a man who always tells the truth."

"I hope you don't regret this someday," Bohannon said.

"I won't even remember it," she said briskly and smiled. "Tomorrow it will be as if it never happened."

**T**he sun was about to drop behind the ridge to the west. The shadows of the trees were long

on the hardpan and flowerbeds. The kids who'd come for riding lessons had been picked up by their parents in vans and four wheelers and BMW's. Most of the horses were in their stalls. Soon the last of the day's riders would be back from exploring the canyon. Bohannon was filling galvanized bins with oats when Fred May's battered white Volkswagen bug rattled into the yard.

He parked it among customer pickups and cars, heaved his bulk out of it, and came at a waddle to where Bohannon worked under the long roof of the stable. May was Madrone's public defender when one was wanted, a fat man with an almost saintly need to help the helpless—whether furred, finned, feathered, or human. You don't earn big lawyer's fees that way, but neither he nor his wife and kids seemed to mind. In fact, they were as cheerful a tribe as Bohannon had ever met. "You want to do some investigating for me?" May said.

Bohannon grinned. "Who's innocent this time?"

"Kevin Milford." May was sweating. He went to a bucket at a corner of the stable and used a tin dipper that hung from a nail there to get himself a long drink of water. "An instructor at the Community College." He hung up the dipper

and came back, wiping his chin with his hand.

Bohannon filled the last of the triangular metal bins and put the sack of oats back where it belonged. He squinted at May in the red glare of the sun. "What's he accused of?"

"Murder," May said. "Of his neighbor. Him you know. Charles Herkimer. The writer."

"I thought he fell downstairs." Bohannon picked one of the bins of oats and carried it to the far end of the stable. Then he set it down outside the first box stall door. Fred May came after him with another bin. This Bohannon took from him and set by the second door. "Cracked his skull."

"The county attorney," May said, "claims it wasn't the fall that cracked it."

"It was Milford?" Bohannon gathered up another bin and went along with it to the third box stall. "Why?"

"It seems Milford was beneficiary of Herkimer's will."

Bohannon, stooping, stopped and stared. "Not his daughter?" He set the bin down and straightened. "He had a daughter—Beatrice. An artist in San Francisco."

"They were estranged, so Archie Fitzmaurice says." Fitzmaurice was a local lawyer.

"Didn't you locate her for Herkimer once?"

"And she refused a reconciliation. She was angry at him for mistreating her mother. But Herkimer still loved her. Or so he told me." Bohannon moved along, picking up the bins and installing them, coming out and leaving the top half of each door open. "Well—she didn't lose out on much, surely. Herkimer wasn't rich."

"Far from it." May had sat himself down on a bench against the stable wall. "The house and lot. Car's old. No value. He was using his savings. There's a trickle of income, maybe eight thousand a year in royalties from his books, the odd small check from newspapers for book reviews. And his Social Security checks—around seven hundred each."

Bohannon sat down beside him and lit a cigarette. "What happened to Milford?"

"He's out on bail," May said. "All the prosecution's got is circumstan—"

"No, no. What's supposed to have happened to make him so desperate for money he'd murder his benefactor to get it?"

"Ah, that. Herkimer decided not to be his benefactor, after all. He'd phoned Fitzmaurice, and set up an appointment to

change his will the next morning."

Bohannon whistled. "And told Milford so?"

"That evening, after supper, when Milford dropped by his house to see if there was anything he needed."

Bohannon grunted. "Did he give a reason?"

"Not that Milford wants to share with me."

"Wonderful," Bohannon said. "Who's he protecting?"

May sighed and got up off the bench. "That's what I want to find out."

"And how much else?" Bohannon dropped his cigarette, stepped on it, and stood up, too.

"It would help to know who really did the killing." May started off toward the white VW. "I don't have to tell you you'll be generously paid. You know how our county rewards its servants."

"It's made you rich." Bohannon ambled after him in the gathering dusk. When May had got himself into the broken seat of the little car, Bohannon slammed the door for him. You had to slam that door; the latch was almost worn out. He heard the clop of hoofs up the road. His riders were coming in. Fred May started the clattering engine. Bohannon looked down at him. "He was an old man. Why didn't he just have a dizzy

spell?" he asked. "Why wasn't it an accident?"

"Because the medical examiner—" May let go the handbrake and ground the gears—"says the body should have been bruised from the fall, and it wasn't. Which means he was dead before he fell. From a blow on the head." May began to back the car. "With a stick of firewood. Discarded afterwards in the lot next door. When they knew what to look for, deputies found it easily. With the bark on. Good for preserving blood and hair." May shifted gears again. "No good for fingerprints." He drove off.

And five shadowy riders came in at the gate.

**T**hough not that unusual for Settlers Cove, the site of Milford's small, brown house interested Bohannon. He walked around it, undergrowth crackling beneath his boots. There were two ways in. One sloped downward between pines, ferns, and poison oak to a deck and the front door; the other one started at a road much lower down, which meant an upward path and then a long, climbing zigzag of stairs to a rear deck and a back door. It was a deserted road, but a car parked here. Often. Tires had dug ruts, oil had dripped, high-heeled shoes had left foot-

prints. Something glittered on the ground. Bohannon crouched and peered at it. An empty lipstick tube. He left it where it lay and climbed toward the back door of the house. A good-looking man in his mid-thirties, with a neatly clipped beard, came out that door and frowned down at him.

"Who are you? What are you prowling around about?"

"Bohannon." He began to mount the shaky steps. "Working for Fred May. You're Kevin Milford? We have to talk."

"Stop," Milford said. "Show me some identification."

Bohannon stopped, dug his wallet out of the hip pocket of his old Levis, let it flop open to show his license, and held this up. Milford chewed his lip worriedly for a minute before he privately decided he was probably making a fool of himself, nodded, and said, "All right. Come on up. I'm sorry, but TV reporters have been driving me crazy. I've had to unplug my phone."

"I noticed."

Because of the pines, the house was dim even in sunny daylight, but Milford kept it neat. Or someone kept it neat for him: a hint of a woman's perfume hung in the air. In a bare-floored sitting room of bookcases and thriftshop furniture, picture windows framing

the woods outside, Milford invited him to sit down. "Coffee?"

"If it's no trouble." Milford went away and came back shortly to set a mug in front of Bohannon and occupy a threadbare wingchair facing him. The coffee mug had the logo of the college on it, and a faint touch of lipstick. Ignoring this, Bohannon tried the coffee, and said, "Tell me about your relationship with Charles Herkimer."

"They've put me on sabbatical," Milford said with a brief laugh. "I've asked for sabbaticals before, but something always came up to prevent it. Now I've got it. All it takes is to be arrested for murder." His smile was wry. "If I'd known that, I'd have got around to it sooner."

"You didn't kill him," Bohannon said. "Who did?"

Milford blinked at him. "How would I know?"

"You know something you're not telling me."

"Not that. If I knew that, I'd tell you." Milford went to stand at a window, looking out. "My relationship with Charles Herkimer? It began with my noticing his name on his mailbox when I drove by. A day or two before I took this house. He's really the reason I rented it—I can't afford it. But Charles

Herkimer lives—lived just down the road."

"That's right," Bohannon said. "You knew his books?"

"I'd read them all," Milford said. "Brilliant. It's a crime how he's been neglected by the literary snobs, the Ivy League old boy network, the New York estab—"

"And you introduced yourself?" Bohannon said.

"And told Mercer Stoltz—that's my department head—we ought to arrange for Herkimer to be Writer in Residence."

"Is it all right if I smoke?" Bohannon said.

"But we're not that well funded," Milford went on. "The best we could manage was a set of six lectures." He dropped into the wing chair again. "At the glorious fee of five hundred dollars."

Bohannon lit a cigarette. "But he accepted?"

"Gratefully. He wasn't a rich writer. The movies never bought his novels. Television, either. That's where the money is in writing. Not books."

"I guess that's why most writers teach college," Bohannon said. "Like you. Are you a writer?"

Milford's smile was self-mocking. "One novel."

A desk in a corner held a word processor and disorderly



heaps of paper. Bohannon glanced that way. "Another one in the making?"

"There has been. I'm a slow worker. But I won't go on now. I wouldn't know how. Not without Charles."

"What do you mean?"

"He helped me through the first," Milford said. "Showed me where I'd gone wrong, set the book on the rails again. I don't know how many times."

Bohannon squinted through cigarette smoke. "For pay?"

Milford shook his head. "He was generous with his time and talent. People of real attainment usually are."

"He must have thought you had something," Bohannon said. "I only knew him slightly. He seemed bitter to me. Soured on life. Hated kids in particular, they say."

"Maybe he only helped me," Milford said, "out of gratitude for the occasional table scraps I scrounged for him from the English department."

"How did your novel do?" Bohannon said.

"It was published, with a paragraph of praise from Charles Herkimer on the jacket, and vanished without a trace. Not one major review. A notice in an Iowa paper was fulsome—but the book was set in Iowa. It's my home state."

"How did Herkimer feel about that?"

"That his comment had put a curse on it," Milford said with a sorry smile. "He blamed himself for ruining my chances. Of course that was nonsense."

"This was some time ago?" Bohannon asked.

"Some time ago," Milford said wanly.

"But you remained friends?"

"We saw a lot of each other. I made that happen. It was no sacrifice for me. I'm divorced, no one to claim my time. He was alone too much, with nothing to occupy him. He got a few books to review, but not many. That wasn't right. He had an astonishing mind. Marvelous memory. As for novels and novelists—there wasn't anything he didn't know. It was a crime the way he was neglected. Sometimes he'd snarl at me for invading his solitude, but alone, he only brooded on his bad luck, and that's dangerous. I barged in almost every day, if only to wash up the dishes, run errands, market, post office, laundromat. Yes, we remained friends. And it was an honor for me."

"So it didn't surprise you when he made you his heir?"

"Surprise?" Milford frowned over that, and scratched his beard for a second. "Maybe—but what I principally felt

was pity. That there wasn't anyone but me, a chance neighbor he'd met only late in life, for this great man to leave his worldly goods to."

Bohannon stubbed out his cigarette. "And when he told you he'd changed his mind? How did you feel about that?"

Milford shrugged. "Disappointed. His books still sell, you know. They bring in a small income. It would have helped me buy time to write in. That's what he'd meant for it to do." He glanced around. "I'm not a big wage-earner."

"Disappointed—that's all?" Bohannon finished his coffee. "Not hurt? Not angry?"

Milford left the chair and stood at the window again. Stood there for a long, silent time. Bohannon didn't know that he was ever going to answer. He opened his mouth to ask again, when Milford said, "No. I understood."

"What do you understand?"

"His reason. The reason why."

Bohannon rose and went to him. "And what was that?"

Milford looked at him. "I'm sorry. I can't tell you."

"When you get into court," Bohannon said, "you'll have to tell a jury. You might as well practice on me. I'm on your side. And it will make my job a hell of a lot easier."

"I didn't kill him," Milford said. "I was here at home when it happened. That's all I can tell you. I don't know what your job is, but you're going to have to do it without my help."

"My job is to clear you of suspicion," Bohannon said.

"Even if you do that," Milford said, "the college won't take me back. I'm finished here." He gestured at the window. "I've loved this place—the woods, the hills, the ocean. I'll miss it."

"And her?" Bohannon said.

Milford scowled. "What are you talking about?"

"The woman who comes to see you by the lower road." Bohannon tilted his head to indicate the rear of the house. "Pretty often. In a European car, from the tire tracks. At night, I expect, so as not to be seen."

Milford made a sound and bunched his fists.

"Whose wife is she?" Bohannon said.

"Get out of here," Milford said through clenched teeth.

"Don't be romantic," Bohannon said. "Putting your neck in a noose for a woman who cheats on her husband? Tell me her name. She was here with you that night. She can alibi you. Use your head."

Milford used his fists. Or tried to. But he knew nothing about fighting. Bohannon

jerked his chin back, and the intended blow went past. Bohannon didn't like to do it, but he drove a fist into Milford's midriff, and the teacher bent double and dropped to his knees, gasping for air. Bohannon laid his business card on the coffee table.

"Phone me," he said, "when you come to your senses."

He frowned. A car stood beside Charles Herkimer's mailbox. He parked his pickup on the road edge opposite, climbed out, crossed the trail. It was a new car, recently washed and waxed. Not touching it—cars had a way of yelping for their owners these days—he peered in through curved glass windows. Nothing personal. A rental. Frowning, he climbed the path to the set of eleven wooden steps that mounted to Herkimer's front deck. At their foot, where the writer's body had been found, he stopped and looked around. Something white lay under the steps. He stooped, and stretched an arm to recover it. An empty envelope, addressed to Herkimer, the sender some L.A. bank. Probably junk mail, but he pocketed it.

Up on the deck, firewood was stacked to one side of the house door. The door was locked, and a paper seal was taped door to

doorframe—printed with a sheriff's warning not to trespass. The seal was intact, but someone had trespassed. He heard movement inside, stepped to a window, put his face to the glass, and saw a figure dodge out of sight.

"Peace officer," he called. "Hold it right there."

The deck wrapped the house to one side. He went that way, and when she came out the back door, he was within a few strides of her. He guessed she realized that her short legs couldn't outrun his long ones because she stopped.

"Mr. Bohannon," she said.

"How did you get in?" he said. "He didn't move here until after you'd left home. Where did you get a key?"

"He always left the bathroom window open," she said, "wherever we lived. I counted on that, and—" she tried a little smile—"I was right, wasn't I?"

"What did you want?" he said.

"Things of mine I left behind all those years ago," she said. "Photographs. A high school yearbook. Childhood drawings and paintings. Nothing of value—except to me."

"You didn't find them," Bohannon said.

"He must have thrown them away when he moved here. It wouldn't have been hard for

him. He wasn't sentimental. And—" she glanced over her shoulder "—there's not much storage space here." She tilted her head. "Why did he buy such a tiny place? It's hardly more than a—a shack."

"Big places run to money in these woods," Bohannon said. "All of a sudden everyone wants to live here."

"But he was world-famous," she protested. "His books are classics. Surely he could have afforded—"

Bohannon shook his head. "When he died, his savings were almost gone. His income from those classic books averaged eight thousand a year. He picked up a little money writing reviews. But he banked his Social Security checks promptly, Ms. Spencer—he needed them to live on."

She peered at him. "You expect me to believe that?"

"Ask the county attorney. He'll confirm it."

"But—" A bench was built against the railings of the deck. She sat down on it. As if her legs wouldn't hold her. "But I thought—all these years I thought—" She was dazed.

"You thought he was wealthy," Bohannon said. "It wasn't old snapshots you were looking for in there just now. It was money, wasn't it? Securi-

ties. Shares. Anything of value."

"No." She shot up angrily off the bench. "I'm not like that. You know that's not true. Five years ago you begged me to come back to him. I wouldn't do it. I didn't give a damn how much money he had."

"Principled," Bohannon said. "Cruel, but principled."

"He was the cruel one," she cried.

"There's a question about the status of his last will and testament," Bohannon said. "He'd notified his attorney he planned to change beneficiaries. As things stand, the will could be voided, and then, as next of kin, you'd become the heir. The attorney's name is Archie Fitzmaurice. Talk to him. This house isn't worth much, but the lot is."

Her smile was wry. "Not enough." She read her watch. "Excuse me." She started off. "I have a plane to catch."

"There'll be other planes," Bohannon said. "Right now, you're under arrest."

She laughed disbelief. "Arrest? What for? Breaking and entering my own father's house?"

"That would be the charge, yes," Bohannon said. "But while you're talking to the sheriff, he'll probably want to

ask you where you were the night your father was killed."

She stared. "You don't think I murdered him?"

"Any healthy adult can pick up a piece of firewood and bash a frail old man over the head with it."

"I was at home. In San Francisco."

"Witnesses?" Bohannon said.

"I live alone." Her mouth twitched. "By preference."

"Anybody call you up on the telephone?"

"If they did, I didn't answer. I work a long, hard day. When I get home, I eat a light supper, shower, listen to music or watch a video, and go to bed. But first, I unplug the phone." She looked at her watch again. "I really must go. Jasmine Wong died visiting relatives in Singapore last month. The owner of Wong cards. You remember the studio?"

"White," he said. "Very white."

"Well, her death leaves me in charge. Those two sons of hers are absolutely worthless. They care nothing about the business, nothing. Only the cash they can get out of it as soon as their mother's estate is cleared. Meanwhile, I've got the whole responsibility for keeping it going."

"I understand," Bohannon said, "but you broke the law,

and I have to take you in." He recited the Miranda warning and took her arm. "Shall we go?"

"Suppose I run?" she said. "Would you shoot me?"

"With what? No, I'd hog-tie you. You'd hate that."

Lena Bianchi stood in dappled sunshine on the trail, shading her eyes with a hand, looking up as Bohannon steered Beatrice Spencer down the steps from Herkimer's. When Lena's husband was alive, he and she had operated a busy little bakery in Madrone. The shop stood empty now, the windows unwashed, the glass display cases thick in dust. The ovens and other equipment were all there, and she paid the rent on the place, but she couldn't operate it alone. Now and then she'd run up a few loaves of her deliciously crusty Italian bread at home and take them around to favored customers—like Bohannon. But not often. Everybody missed the bakery and kept asking when she planned to start it up again.

"When my son comes to live here," she kept telling them. "Vittorio. Then we will open the bakery again. It will not be much longer. As soon as I can build a house for him and his

wife and my grandchildren. Right here."

She meant on the overgrown lot that lay between her place and Charles Herkimer's. The trouble was, the owner of that lot had dreams of building on it himself someday. He lived in Los Angeles. The years went by, but he stubbornly refused to sell. And Lena had to content herself with holiday visits by Vittorio and his noisy brood of kids.

Now Lena said, "Mr. Bohannon. Good morning." She was a gaunt woman with dark, sunken eyes. These eyes looked piercingly at Beatrice Spencer. "Is there trouble?"

"Mrs. Bianchi," Bohannon said, "Beatrice Spencer. She's Charles Herkimer's daughter."

"A fine daughter," Lena said, "not to come and see her poor old father until he is dead. In my village in Sicily they would stone such a daughter."

Bohannon still held Beatrice Spencer's arm. He felt a tremor run through her. He heard her draw breath to make a sharp retort. "Times change," he told Lena quickly, and hurried his fuming prisoner across the road to the green pickup. When he'd got her and himself into it, and started the engine, he called to Lena, "When do I get to taste some of your wonderful bread again?"

She laughed with delight. "One day soon," she called. "I will bring it to you." She waved as the truck rolled off. "I promise."

Bohannon worked his way against a heedless, jostling current of loud-voiced young people, laughing, arguing, pouring along a corridor of the college. He found at last the door number he'd been given, and walked into a lecture room whose floor was strewn with papers, soda cans, plastic cups, burrito wrappers, and where all the tiered seats were empty. At a steel and Formica table at the front of the room, a bespectacled bald man was bent over a spread of papers. A pen was in his fingers. He didn't look up when Bohannon reached the table. Bohannon stood and waited. When Stoltz had finished reading, he made a note in red at the top of the paper, graded it B, and laid it aside. He looked at Bohannon, and was startled. He hadn't expected a fortyish outsider in Levis, weathered Stetson, scuffed cowboy boots.

"Can I—uh—help you?"

"Mercer Stoltz?" Bohannon asked. And when the man nodded, Bohannon gave his name and showed his license. "I'm on special assignment for the pub-

lic defender. In the matter of Charles Herkimer's death."

"Ah." Stoltz stood up and held out his hand. "You'll be helping Kevin Milford."

Bohannon shook the hand. "He's not making it easy."

"Sit down, sit down." Stoltz pushed at him a bentwood chair with spindly iron legs. Bohannon found it wobbly, but it held him. Stoltz took his own chair again. "I regard Kevin as highly gifted. Madrone was lucky to get him."

"He thinks he's going to be fired," Bohannon said.

Stoltz's egg-shaped face clouded. "Not if I can help it," he said. "This whole thing is ridiculous. Kevin adored Charles Herkimer. The sun rose and set in him. He'd be the last person on earth to kill the man."

"That's how it looks to me," Bohannon said. "But he was over at Herkimer's place the night he was killed. He admits that. And Lena Bianchi confirms it. She's a near neighbor. She heard his voice. Just after sunset."

"He looked after the old man," Stoltz said. "He worried about him. He was in and out of Herkimer's almost daily." He glanced around the large room with its scarred walls and nicked furniture. "If we were more than a poor stepchild of the California university sys-

tem, the college itself would have had Charles Herkimer as its ward. And rejoiced in the distinction it brought us. That's how these things are done in civilized places." Stoltz frowned. "Sunset? But didn't I read the—the death occurred late that night?"

"Ten thirty, eleven. But Milford has no alibi for that time. Which leaves the county attorney free to argue that he stayed with Herkimer all evening, trying to get him not to change his will. Finally Milford got ugly. Herkimer ordered him out of the house, and on the front deck, Milford picked up a stick of firewood and struck the old man on the head with it, killing him instantly—after which his body fell, or Milford dragged it, down the stairs."

"No." Stoltz shook his head. "Absolutely impossible."

Bohannon said, "Who's the woman Milford's been seeing?"

"Woman?" Stoltz jerked his head back. Behind his thick glasses, he blinked, bewildered. "He's—he's divorced. His ex-wife lives in—Spokane. She's married again."

"I didn't mean his ex-wife." Bohannon pushed back his hat, tilted back the rickety chair. "I meant somebody else's wife." He explained that. "Milford hasn't confided in you? There's



no gossip around the campus? You can't help me?"

Stoltz laughed, and turned a little red. "Well, I can tell you one wife it's not. Mine. Shanna detests Charles Herkimer and all his works. One of the highlights of the year was the alumni barbecue at which she told him so to his poor old astonished face." Stoltz wagged his head. "She's an ardent feminist, and his novels, to her mind, are an insult to women, demeaning, stereotyping, exploitative . . . the whole arsenal of pejoratives. They seem to multiply on their own like amoebas. I don't try to keep up."

"Was Milford there?" Bohannon asked. "Did he hear her?"

"Everyone heard her." Stoltz frowned to himself. "It's odd, now that you mention it. Kevin can be fiery. I've had to caution him a few times for being too outspoken in disputes with higher-ups. But he didn't rush to Herkimer's side that day. He walked off across the grass, putting as much distance between him and the fracas as he could." Looking puzzled, Stoltz nibbled the top of the ballpoint pen. He turned to Bohannon. "Did he think I'd be offended? Surely he knows me better than that."

"Maybe militant feminists scare him," Bohannon said. "Or

maybe he didn't think Herkimer needed help. I've heard the old man had a whiplash tongue."

"Oh, true, true." Stoltz nodded, bald head gleaming in the light from the high windows. Then he laughed. "Did you read his treatment of Ronald Loughlin's latest novel? In the *New York Times* book review? Front page. Sunday before last? Devastating."

"I missed that," Bohannon said.

"Much fanfare for the book," Stoltz said. "Loughlin's first in seven years, you know. He had a long struggle with alcohol. Everyone believed he was finished. Not so. Full-page ads, television interviews, a nationwide tour. First printing of a hundred thousand copies. And here comes good, gray Charles Herkimer, whose entire *oeuvre* hasn't sold that many, and simply chops it to pieces. And not big pieces, either. Fragments. Shreds. Brilliant analysis. Savage. Simply deadly."

Bohannon grunted. "Herkimer probably resented his success. Even five years ago, when we talked a little, he was pretty bitter. Figured he was as good as the big names, but he'd never gotten his due."

"He hadn't. But that doesn't signify here. He was right—Loughlin's book is empty and

pretentious. And the word is, Loughlin's tour is a failure. No one comes to the bookshops where he appears to sign copies. He was canceled from the *Today* show. And *Good Morning, America*."

"The power of the press," Bohannon said.

Chores were waiting for him at the stables, but on his way to Rodd Canyon, he stopped in at the sheriff station where Fred May had his small office. Children's paintings, in bright, sloppy colors, were Scotch-taped to the walls. May's feet in worn tennis shoes were up on his desk. He was eating a pizza. A large pizza. One slice at a time, but steadily, washing the bites down with apple juice from a big jug. Apple juice was his nod to healthy intake. The pizza was the opposite.

"Gerard," he told Bohannon, "let her off with a notice to appear. Next month. The twenty-fifth." He pushed the pizza box toward Bohannon. "Help yourself."

"Not hungry," Bohannon said. "Did he search her?"

"T. Hodges did that," May said. "You shouldn't smoke so much. Heart attack, lung cancer. I can't spare you."

"And you shouldn't eat so much," Bohannon said. "Hypertension, diabetes. And none

of us can spare you. Had she taken anything from her father's house?"

"Nothing. How could she? Between the county attorney, Archie Fitzmaurice, and me, we've got every scrap of paper that means anything. Anyway, what would she be hoping for?"

"Money," Bohannon said. "She's in need of money."

May squinted. "Did she say so?"

"Indirectly," Bohannon said. "When I told her there was a chance she'd inherit, and that her father's property would bring a good price, she said, 'Not enough.'"

"For what?" May said.

"Have somebody in San Francisco find out," Bohannon said. "Can you do that?"

May put his feet down, wiped his mouth and fingers on a flimsy little paper napkin, and sat forward to riffle through a Rolodex. "I think so. There's a deputy D.A. up there who owes me a favor. What's his name? Fensky."

"She works for Wong Greeting Cards," Bohannon said. "On Sutter Street."

"I know that," May said, and picked up his telephone.

**D**eputy T. Hodges wore sunglasses today, against the glare on the water. A trim,

dark young woman, her lustrous brown eyes were her most fetching feature—and Bohannon regretted those glasses. They were in a cove along the beach, a place they often came to, where the tide, in restlessly shifting blues and greens, swirled around ragged black rocks. Gulls, cormorants, pelicans perched on the rocks. And below them, sea otters bobbed sleek heads up through floating tangles of brown kelp.

T. Hodges opened the picnic basket Bohannon had brought with him in the green pickup when he stopped by for her at the sheriff's station at noon. She and Bohannon had been seeing each other for years now. There was no more to it than that. Bohannon had a wife. In a mental hospital over Atascadero way, on the far side of the mountains. Bohannon never forgot her, not for a minute. His love for her was tender as ever, his grieving, his regret. It used to be he went to visit her every week, though she never knew him, never spoke a word, rarely even looked at him. But he'd been no good to himself, Stubbs, Rivera, anyone for days afterward. The horses were neglected, and the owners. It was no way to get on with life. He'd made himself stop going. Not stop loving her. Not stop longing to see her. Just going.

T. Hodges held out sandwiches in both hands. "Roast beef or chicken?"

"First I'll pour the wine." The basket sat on a rock between them. He took a bottle from it, rummaged out the corkscrew, popped the cork. Sturdy flat-bottomed glasses were the only kind to set on the rough tables nature provided here. He filled two of these, handed one to her, thumped the cork back into the bottle, pushed it down into a bed of sand at his side, picked up his glass, and lifted it to her.

"To us," she said with a smile.

"Yup," he said, but he suddenly felt glum. "You ought to find yourself some young guy and get married. This is no good. There's no future in me, Teresa."

"What?" She stared. "What brings this on?"

"I don't know." He squinted up at the cloudless blue sky and gave her half a smile. "Maybe the day's too beautiful. Maybe I'm liking these times with you too much. I do, you know."

"I do, too," she said. "Very much. Always."

"But that's not how it should be," Bohannon said. "I don't deserve you. And you deserve better."

"Hack, please stop this." She said it sharply, angrier than he'd bargained for. "I hate it

when you start telling me what's best for me. You're not my father."

He barked a brief laugh. "I'm old enough."

She drew a breath to argue, then instead reached for his sandwich. "That's roast beef. You'll want horseradish sauce on it." She found a jar and a knife in the basket, carefully opened the sandwich, spread on the white stuff, closed the sandwich, handed it back. "The wine is lovely."

He was grateful for her common sense. "Thank you," he said. "Did the department get a fax addressed to me?"

"Ah." She had bitten into her sandwich. Now she laid it on its plate, wiped her fingers, and took a folded paper out of her uniform jacket. She handed it to him, nodding instead of speaking because her mouth was full.

"Good. Thank you." He put his sandwich down, too, opened the paper. Something shrieked and whacked the paper in a frantic flurry of wings, and a gull flew off with its beak full. "Hey!" Bohannon yelled.

T. Hodges laughed. "He stole your sandwich."

"Half, he did," Bohannon said. The gull was circling above the surf rocks. He had to land to eat, but he was leery of his fellows. Now they saw that

he had food and lifted off to try to snatch it away. The gull dropped the sandwich into the surf. "You pirate," Bohannon shouted, shaking a fist. "Serves you right."

"You'd better eat what he left you," T. Hodges said. "Before he comes back."

Bohannon looked around for the fax. It went blowing away toward the sea cliff. "Whoa," he shouted, and took off to catch the paper. He sat down with it, ate the half sandwich the gull had left him, and read the itinerary Ronald Loughlin's publisher had sent from New York. He washed the last bite of sandwich down with wine and handed the page back to T. Hodges. "He was here, all right. Close enough."

She studied the list of towns on Loughlin's book tour and cocked an eyebrow at Bohannon. "Fresno, Santa Maria, and—San Luis Obispo. All on the date when Charles Herkimer was murdered."

"I want to talk to him," Bohannon said. "Where's he gone to now?"

"Let's see." She peered through the dark glasses. "Madison, Minneapolis, Chicago . . . that's all history."

Bohannon dug into the basket and handed her a waxed-paper wrapped wedge of Stubb's special double choco-

late cake with marshmallow frosting. Bohannon unwrapped his piece of cake and, warily eyeing the seagulls, ate it in big bites while she read on.

"Then there was Philadelphia, New York, Boston. Ah, here. Seattle, Portland, and yesterday San Francisco."

Bohannon gulped wine. "And today?"

"San Diego, Los Angeles, and—ta-da!—the last stop on the tour, Santa Barbara." She handed back the paper. "One of those late-night radio call-in shows."

"It would have to be," Bohannon grouched, "wouldn't it? Just perfect for a man who has to get up at sunrise."

"Loughlin?" She carefully unwrapped her cake. "What in the world for?"

"Not him," Bohannon finished off his cake and licked his fingers. "Me. For my horses."

"Ah. But you have to talk to him. You said so."

"On the theory that Charles Herkimer's review ruined his book's chance to become a best-seller, or any kind of seller at all. Scuttled his attempt at a comeback after seven years of silence and steady drinking."

T. Hodges frowned and tilted her head. "Do you really believe anybody would commit murder over a bad review?"

Bohannon filled their glasses again. "Not unless they were a little crazy. I think Herkimer was. Maybe Loughlin is, too. It appears to me writers can take themselves pretty seriously."

"I suppose," T. Hodges mused, "after a lifetime of sitting alone all day filling imaginary worlds with imaginary people they might get the idea they're gods."

"It's possible." Bohannon put his glass down so he could shield a match from the sea wind and light a cigarette. "And gods can take life as easily as they bestow it, can't they?" He blew away smoke and gazed glumly at the sparkling sea. "Yup. Late night or no late night, I have to talk to Ronald Loughlin."

**L**oughlin parted his dyed hair in the middle. At sixty he had pouchy eyes, baggy cheeks, sagging jowls. His flashy Western togs featured a lot of hand-wrought silver—hatband, belt buckle, and a bolo set with an enormous hunk of polished turquoise. In a deep-cushioned leather booth in the bar of a Santa Barbara hotel at one thirty in the morning, Bohannon asked him, "Do you keep horses?"

"I was raised with horses," Loughlin said. "In Nebraska I

rode before I was five. It's part of my legend."

"What about the facts?"

"My readers don't care about facts." Loughlin drank from a squat glass filled with Wild Turkey and shaved ice. "No, I don't keep horses." He eyed Bohannon. "But I guess you do."

"I own stables. But I used to be a deputy sheriff, and sometimes I still get asked for help. Right now, it's in the matter of Charles Herkimer."

"Nobody can help him. Not any more."

"The county attorney's arrested a friend of his, a young college instructor. He's the one I'm trying to help."

Loughlin squinted. "What's it got to do with me?"

"On the night it happened, you were in San Luis Obispo. That's only an hour's drive from Madrone."

Loughlin squinted. "You suggesting I killed him?"

Bohannon shrugged. "You had a motive."

Loughlin looked around the dim and empty barroom. Somewhere in the shadows, a waiter was counting his tips. The clink of the coins was the only sound. "You're joking."

"He hurt your book with that review he wrote in the *New York Times*. You lost television appearances. Your bookstore signings were a bust."

Loughlin laughed annoyance. "Good God. It happens. Ask any writer. Some books you luck out with, some you don't. It's a gamble."

"Only you'd bet your life on this one," Bohannon said. "After seven years, when the world thought you were through, you were back with a novel that was going to prove you were still the undisputed champ. And then Charles Herkimer knocks you out with a single punch in the first round."

Loughlin sneered. "Charles Herkimer was a pathetic, envious little paper-tapper."

"Can you account for your time after that TV broadcast in San Luis at nine?"

"I sat in my motel room getting drunk," Loughlin said. "The bitch who interviewed me hadn't even read my book. All she wanted to talk about was Herkimer's review."

"Anyone come to the room?"

"Not even a hooker. I got blasted, Bohannon, all alone, by myself, and eventually I passed out."

"You didn't drive over to Madrone?" Bohannon said. "To have a talk with Charles Herkimer?"

"He was nothing to me," Loughlin snorted. "Just another nobody with a typewriter. They're all over." He tilted up

his glass, drained the whisky from it, held the glass high. "*Com-paaaah-draaay!*" he belated. "*Por favo-o-ohr!*"

Bohannon said, "Your publisher faxed me your complete itinerary. With the names of all the places where you slept. I checked with the motel in San Luis this afternoon. You didn't arrive back at that room until nearly midnight. To get there, you had to pass the office window. The night clerk saw you. You're not a man easy to forget."

Loughlin started another lie, but stopped while a mustachioed, middle-aged Mexican barkeep in a red vest came with a fresh whisky, glanced at Bohannon's untouched glass of iced coffee, picked up Loughlin's empty glass, and went away. Loughlin leaned across at Bohannon, and said in a soft, whining voice:

"You don't know what these tours are like. The hotel rooms, motel rooms, the bookstores, the shopping malls, the planes, the airports, the TV stations, the radio studios—after awhile they become a blur. You're in a different city every day, sometimes two, even three. How do you expect me to remember one night from another?"

"I'd like you to try," Bohannon said. "It was a very im-

portant night for my client. And for Charles Herkimer."

Loughlin gave a dry laugh. "You're right there." He picked up the full glass and drank from it. Deeply. Avoiding Bohannon's gaze. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Will you stop staring at me. Hell, I don't even know where the son of a bitch lived."

"The sheriff found a letter from you among his papers. Written at what I guess a writer would call white heat. Dated the same Sunday as the review appeared. Addressed to his house in Madrone. You knew where he lived."

Loughlin said, "That doesn't mean I went there."

"Come on," Bohannon said. "You were too near that night to resist the chance to tell him to his face what you thought of him. And you drove to Madrone, the section called Settlers Cove. No, don't lie again. It's too easy to check out the mileage on a rental car."

"So I went there. That doesn't mean I killed him."

"You were steamed about the TV interview. It had you talking, but you ended by smashing his head in."

"No." Loughlin was pale. "Yes, all right, I went. Dark as hell in those woods. I saw lights on in the house, and I crept up on the porch. I was going to



knock, when I heard voices inside. He had someone with him. A woman."

Bohannon stared. "A woman? What woman?"

"I couldn't see her. The curtains were closed. I only heard her voice." Loughlin snorted. "But it brought me to my senses. Skulking around out there, ready to kill. I was acting like a damn fool." He wagged his head. "God, am I grateful to that woman."

When he swung the green pickup in at the stable gate, gray light was beginning to outline the canyon ridges. He jounced the truck to a stop in its usual place and slid down out of it bone weary. All that had kept him from falling asleep on the long, dark, lonely drive back from Santa Barbara had been that barroom iced coffee he'd finally forced himself to drink. Its effect was gone now. He ached for sleep, but there was no time to sleep. He heard the horses moving in their stalls. He drew a couple of deep breaths, then started for the stables. And like an angel of mercy, a figure stepped out of the shadows. Rivera.

"Go to bed, Hack," he said. "I will look after things."

"What are you doing here?" Bohannon said. "Suppose the

monsignor wakes up and misses you?"

"Stubbs phoned me," Rivera said. In the very dim light his teeth shone in one of those gentle smiles of his. "The monsignor is old—he will not waken until I wake him." Buckets clattered. He began to fill them from a tap at the corner of the stable. "Was your errand a successful one?"

"Surprising," Bohannon said, and walked numbly away. "Thanks, Rivera."

"Seashell!" Rivera had rattled open a box stall door, and was talking to a horse. "*Buenos días, querida.*"

It seemed to Bohannon no more than minutes before someone opened his door in that same way. He was under a patchwork quilt in his pine poster bed. The quilt was yanked off him, and a hand shook his shoulder. His face was to the knotty pine wall. He opened his eyes, and there was hurtful daylight in the room. He squeezed his eyes shut again and tried to brush the pestering hand away.

"Come on, Hack," Stubbs said. "It's past noon. And you got a visitor."

"If it's the president," Bohannon mumbled, pulling up the quilt, "tell him I'm voting for the other guy."

It wasn't the president. It was Fred May. He had used the time it took Bohannon to shower, shave, and dress to build for himself and wolf down a thick turkey sandwich. Seated at the round pine table, he was polishing off a chunk of Stubb's chocolate cake when Bohannon came into the kitchen. May pushed the plate away and wiped his fingers.

"The news from San Francisco," he said, "is that Wong Greeting Cards will go on the market as soon as the old lady's will clears."

"I knew that already," Bohannon said. He dragged out his chair and slumped into it, still not sure he was ready to start the day. "Is there coffee, George?"

"Pretty strong," Stubbs observed, pouring from the tall, white-speckled blue pot. "Been waiting a while."

"Her sons inherit, right?" Bohannon asked May.

May nodded. "And they'll sell. It seems they're gamblers. It's all they know, it's all they do."

Stubbs hobbled to the table with a mug of steaming coffee, and Bohannon put his mouth to it right away. And burned himself, and set the mug down, and lit a cigarette. "And what's the value of Wong Greeting Cards?"

"Half a million," May nodded. "Best estimate."

Bohannon whistled. "That's what she meant by 'not enough.'"

Noises outside made Stubbs clatter a pan and start limping for the open door. "Damn kids."

"I'll see to it." Bohannon went. Out in the white-fenced oval, three twelve-year-olds were practicing barrel racing. Two on their own horses, one on Buck. The horses had more sense than the kids. But the kids were pushing them. There was a lot of highpitched yelling, hoof pounding, and dust. Bohannon stepped to the edge of the plank walkway and shouted at them, "Yo! Take it easy." They looked at him, red-faced, resentful, but after a restless minute or two, they settled down, and he went back into the kitchen. The coffee mug was in his hand. He blew at the coffee and tried it again.

"She wants to buy the place herself," he said.

"It will likely go to Hallmark or one of the other big ones," May said. "It's a small line, but profitable."

"When I was there," Bohannon said, "most of the designs seemed to be hers."

"And there's where it gets interesting," May said.

Bohannon blinked at him. "How so?"

"The copyrights belong to Wong," May said. He had discovered a drizzle of mayonnaise down the bulging front of his faded red "Save the Whales" sweatshirt. He was rubbing at it with a napkin. "Spencer's been there twenty years. If the company's sold, her designs are part of the assets. She loses a lifetime's work."

"No wonder she was shocked to learn her father wasn't rich. She'd counted on him for a six figure loan."

May cocked a skeptical eyebrow. "And when he wouldn't give it to her, she lost control and bashed his head in?"

"Sounds farfetched, but some woman was with him late that night." Bohannon ambled back to the table and sat down again. "I have a witness who heard them talking."

"You do?" May sat straight. "That's new."

"I never sleep," Bohannon said.

"Heard," May said carefully, "but not saw?"

Bohannon repeated Ronald Loughlin's story. "His tour is finished. He lives in Phoenix. There must be some low lawyer's trick you can use to get him to come here for a day. When he does, the daughter should be here, too, shouldn't she? So he can listen to her.

Maybe he'll recognize her voice."

In front of Buck's box stall, Bohannon was wiping sweat off the big gelding with handfuls of straw. He'd tended to the horses that were boarders first. He was seething about how the kids had lathered all three mounts up, planning in his mind the lecture he was going to deliver to their parents when they showed up next time. But he knew he himself was much to blame. Trying to get along here with only Stubbs as help was stupid. Rivera was indispensable. But the monsignor, at eighty-two, was failing fast. More and more, the burden of the seminary rested on Rivera's shoulders. Before long, he'd have to stop coming down here at all. Bohannon was going to have to hire and break in a new, green hand. He sure as hell did not look forward to that.

Now a van rolled into the yard and stopped near him, and a dark, thick-set young man got out. He wore a suit and tie. "Hi, Mr. Bohannon," he called. He sounded cheerful. Bohannon watched him go to the side of the van, open a door there, and bring out white paper sacks holding long, tawny-crusted loaves of bread. And he knew who the young man

was—Victor Bianchi, Vittorio as his mother always called him. In the years since Bohannon had last seen him, he'd put on weight. The van door rolled shut, and the baker's son came toward Bohannon, arms loaded.

"My mother says you asked for these," he said.

Bohannon grinned. "Thank you, that's right. Just a minute. Come on, Buck." He led the horse into the stall, fastened the lower half of the door, and turned back to Bianchi. "Let's take them to the kitchen. Here, let me help you." They walked toward the green-trimmed white ranch house. "How is Lena? Pleased to see you, I'll bet." Bohannon opened the screen door and stood aside so Bianchi could go inside. "She talks about you all the time."

"I know." Bianchi made a wry face, and laid his burden on a counter, the crisp white paper of the sacks crackling. "About how I'm coming back and we'll open the bakery again."

"That's it." Bohannon added his loaves to Bianchi's. There were six in all. He laughed and scratched his head. "How does she think I'm going to eat all these?"

Bianchi looked around. "Aren't there three of you?"

"There used to be," Bohannon said, "But—"

"Freeze them," Bianchi said. "They freeze just fine. Keep forever. Taste fresh-baked as soon as they thaw out." His dark face sobered. "Mr. Bohannon, I know you're busy, but if you've got a minute, can we talk?"

"I've got a minute." Bohannon opened the refrigerator. "Sit down. Would you like a beer?"

"No, thank you." Bianchi drew out a chair at the table.

"There's lemonade. Homemade. What about lemonade?"

"Fine." Bianchi's smile was brief. Bohannon dropped ice cubes into a glass, poured lemonade over them from a big, frosty pitcher, set the pitcher back, got himself a bottle of Dos Equis, closed the refrigerator. He set the lemonade in front of Bianchi and sat down across from him with his beer. "Thank you." Bianchi sipped the lemonade. "Mr. Bohannon, I don't know what to do." He looked miserable. Bohannon waited, attentive. Bianchi said, "My mother's plans—they're impossible. I own three trattorias in Los Angeles. They keep me going sixteen hours a day, seven days a week." He waved his hands. "Can I control them from Madrone? That's crazy. I can never move up here."

"I guess not." Bohannon swallowed some beer. "But surely your mother understands that." He cocked his head. "You mean you've never told her?"

"It would only have upset her. And there wasn't any need. Not till now."

Bohannon frowned. "What's happened?"

"You know that lot next door to her place?"

"She plans to build a house there," Bohannon said, "for you and your wife and kids." He nodded. "Yes, she's told me many times. Told everyone. It's her big dream."

"Yeah," Bianchi said gloomily. "But a dream was all it was. The man who owned the lot refused to sell. A doctor. Dr. Steiner. She used to write to him every year, but he always answered, sorry, he was going to build on it himself when he retired, and she finally stopped writing. It got too discouraging. Well, guess what." Bianchi's smile was wry. "All of a sudden, he's dead, and my mother's arranged with his bank to buy the lot. I've never seen her so happy. She plans to start building that house before the year is out. What am I going to do?"

"You could sell your restaurants," Bohannon said. "This is a safer place to raise kids than L.A."

Bianchi snorted. "Maybe you're right, now that old Herkimer's dead. He used to raise hell when I'd bring the kids to see their grandma. Always snarling and snapping at them, threatening to call the sheriff. There's nothing he'd have hated more than for us to move in next door. And he told my mother so."

"See how things work themselves out?" Bohannon said.

"Not everything," Bianchi said.

It was ten at night. Bohannon sat with a sulky Beatrice Spencer in the living room of her dead father's house. Books lined the walls and stood in stacks on tables. The place had likely never been tidy, but now dust had settled everywhere. There was a strong sense that the owner was never coming back. Funny how inanimate things could look forlorn, Bohannon thought. These did.

As on the night Charles Herkimer died, the curtains were drawn across the windows. The lamps were lit. A few photographs leaned against the spines of books along the shelves. Bohannon rose, holding a glass of Herkimer's whisky, and went to look at them. He said, "I guess he liked being reminded of these peo-

ple." His daughter had a drink, too, but it sat beside her untouched. She'd said nothing once she'd failed after repeated tries to get an answer from him as to why he'd brought her here. He asked, "You know any of them?"

"There's my mother," she said. "And a couple of the men had been friends of his since schooldays. No, I don't know them all. I remember that place by the lake."

There were postcard portraits of dead authors. "Kafka, Joyce, Faulkner," Bohannon said. "This one's Yeats, right?"

"As a young man," she said. "It's from the National Portrait Gallery in London. I forgot the painter's name." She studied him, with her head tilted. "You're an odd man, aren't you? I'd never have taken you for a reader."

"I didn't get a lot of schooling as a kid," Bohannon said. "Later on, it came to me you can't be much help to yourself or anybody else if you don't know anything."

"And you're a man who wants to help people," she said.

"So I took to reading," he said, "when I had time. I still do. I'll never catch up. But I won't finish as ignorant as I started." He gave her a little smile.

"Whom are you helping tonight?" she asked.

"A young man you don't know," Bohannon said. "A friend of your father's. The county attorney claims he killed him. I don't think so."

"I don't see how bringing me here can help save anyone." She looked around her and seemed to shiver. "Certainly not me. It's absurd, I know, but I'm uncomfortable. My father didn't like me in his room. He needed to be alone. To concentrate. On his writing." She gave a short, dry laugh. "To me, this is the room. Just like the ones of my childhood. Filled with his things. And he's still in it. And annoyed that I've intruded. Can't we go now?"

Bohannon, close to a window, heard softly departing footfalls on the deck, a creaking of the steps. "It won't be much longer."

"Good." She took a sip of the whisky and made a face. "He and I will never come to terms."

"Writing's art of a kind," Bohannon said, "isn't it? I guess you don't much appreciate being interrupted painting your designs, either, do you?"

"That doesn't put us on common ground. I don't make life miserable for people who love me, just to get my work done." Now her eyes pleaded with Bohannon. "Why did you bring

me here? I have a right to know."

"To check out a witness," Bohannon said, "who claims a woman was in this room with your father the night he was killed. He didn't see her, only heard her voice."

"Her voice?" She stiffened. "You mean my voice."

"Don't know. He's been outside, listening. We're here because we wanted everything the same as that night."

She stood up. "A witness?" She ran for the door and yanked it open. "What witness?" She went out. Her heels knocked the planks of the deck. From the top of the steps, she said, "There's no one." She charged back into the room and glared at him. "And no one heard my voice that night."

"We'll see," Bohannon said, and began to turn out the lamps. He picked up her shoulder bag and handed it to her.

She snatched it. "I wasn't here, Mr. Bohannon. I did not kill my father." She ran across the deck again. "Where is this witness? I want to see him."

"He doesn't want to be seen," Bohannon said.

"But that's not fair." She started down the stairs.

"Watch your step," Bohannon called, and locked the door. He didn't catch up with her until she was standing in the

road, looking up and down it. The white Volkswagen bug was gone. The dark woods were quiet. Far away, frogs sang in some creek. "If he says it was you," Bohannon told her, "I guarantee you'll see him. If he doesn't, there'd be no point." He started along the road's edge toward his pickup. "Shall we go find out?"

"I'm not afraid," she said, and followed him.

Fred May met them in the lighted parking lot of the sheriff station. Along its margins, old eucalyptus trees loomed up into the dark. The wind off the sea rustled them. Leaves and seed pods pattered down. May waddled toward the green pickup from his white VW, where he'd been leaning, eating a candy bar. He finished it off, tucked the wrapper into the hip pocket of his threadbare jeans, and blinked up at Bohannon in the truck.

"No luck. Wrong voice. Too high. Talked too fast."

Beside Bohannon, Beatrice Spencer breathed relief, and muttered under her breath words he didn't catch. Bohannon asked May, "Where is he now?"

"Balboa Motor Inn," May said. "He's not happy."

"I guess not," Bohannon said. "He needs for us to find that



woman or his story isn't worth a dime."

"He's added a lot of credibility to it tonight. I'm ready to believe there was a woman." May yawned. "But who? How the hell do we find her?"

Bohannon shrugged. "Keep looking," he said.

"Am I free to go now, please?" Beatrice Spencer said.

"Absolutely." Bohannon reached across and worked the door handle for her. As she climbed down, May walked around to shake her hand.

"Thank you very much," he said. "We really appreciate—"

"Mr. May," she snapped, "I realize I have no choice but to see you on the twenty-fifth of next month, but if you bother me one more time before that, I swear I will sue you and your godforsaken county for every penny you and it possess." And digging into her shoulder bag to find the key, she marched off toward her rental car.

"Would that get her the half million?" Bohannon asked.

"I doubt it," May said.

Bohannon waited in the green pickup on the dark lower road behind Kevin Milford's house. A few yards away a red Italian sports car stood in the place Bohannon had earlier judged she always parked

it—the married woman Milford wanted no one to learn about.

Bohannon had radioed the car's license number in, and now knew who owned it. The information made such perfect sense he had to laugh. But it wouldn't seem funny to Mercer Stoltz, the bald and trusting chairman of the English department. *I can tell you one wife it's not. Mine.*

Bohannon wasn't alone. May was with him. So was Ronald Loughlin. Loughlin wore a ferocious cologne. Even with the windows of the pickup rolled down, Bohannon's eyes smarted, and now and then May, who sat between them, gave a small strangled cough.

Bohannon hoped the stink wouldn't warn the woman off as she came down the back steps—if she ever did. He checked his watch. Fifteen minutes past midnight. Up the hillside, a rectangle of light appeared, voices murmured, a door closed, the light was gone. Heels tapped steps.

"She's coming," Bohannon said.

Loughlin groaned. "Jesus, I hate this."

"Take it easy," Bohannon said, "it'll be over soon." He cautiously worked the door handle and slipped down out of the truck. "All you have to do is listen." He let the door stand

open, and moved down the road, to station himself in deep tree shadow near the convertible.

It sat in a patch of moonlight, and when she reached it, he stepped into the road, touching his hat. "Excuse me, ma'am," he said. "Peace officer."

"Dear God," she said, "you frightened me."

"Sorry, but I need to ask you a few questions."

"Here? Now?" She was a tall woman, handsome, but years older than Kevin Milford. She stepped backward, put her hand on the car door. "What about?"

"This vehicle," Bohannon said. "It's been reported stolen."

She gave a disbelieving laugh. "Not by me, it hasn't."

"You want to show me the registration, please?"

"No," she said. "I don't think you're a police officer. I think you're a rapist."

"He's not, ma'am." Soft shoes cracked twigs on the roadway. They brought Fred May. He gave his name. "I'm the public defender. This is Hack Bohannon. A private operative. He's doing some investigating for me."

"Of my supposedly stolen automobile?" she scoffed.

"No—of the death of Charles Herkimer." His face a soft

moon in the night, he glanced up at the house. "Kevin Milford has been charged with the murder. I'm trying to get evidence for his defense."

"You're trying to destroy my life." She yanked open the car door and dropped inside. She started to thrust a key into the ignition, and Bohannon leaned in and took her keys away from her. "Give me those back," she cried.

"Did you go visit Herkimer the night he was killed?" Bohannon asked. "We have a witness who heard him talking to a woman inside his living room that night. Was it you?"

She hooted. "Why would I talk to Charles Herkimer?"

"Because, Mrs. Stoltz, it was over you he was going to change his will. He'd made Milford his heir. Then he discovered you and Milford were sleeping together. You'd insulted Herkimer and his books in public. His attitude to Milford did a complete turnaround. Milford knew you were the reason. Herkimer had told him early that evening. You felt guilty, and went to the old man to try to change his mind. You love Milford, maybe you think he has a future as a writer. You're not in a position to help him financially, you wanted him to have the money Herkimer could leave him. But

Herkimer wouldn't listen to you, and you killed him."

"Ridiculous." She scrambled out of the car. "Kevin," she called. "Kevin, come down here. Now. Please."

Up the hill, the back door banged open. "Shanna?" The rectangle of light was back. Milford was silhouetted in it. Kicking into trousers. Zipping them up, he came at a run down the rickety steps. Barefoot. At the foot of the stairs he stopped and stared. "What the hell is going on? May, Bohannon? Is that you? What are you doing to Mrs. Stoltz?"

"What you wouldn't do for yourself," Bohannon said.

The door of the pickup slammed, and the heels of Ronald Loughlin's fancy tooled cowboy boots knocked the paving. "Forget it," he said. "It's not her. It's the wrong voice—again." He lifted his hat, and in the moonlight his hound dog face looked pained. "I'm sorry, ma'am."

Kevin Milford stared at him. "Are you who I think you are?" He looked around, bewildered. "What kind of craziness is this? Will somebody goddamit explain?"

Somebody explained.

**A**washer and dryer stood in a white-washed shed behind the kitchen. For years

the laundry had been Rivera's job. Bohannon had scarcely set foot in here. Now he stood in the doorway of the sunlit place, breathing smells of soap and bleach and blinking around. He peered into the machines, crouched to squint under counters and tables, and at last, beneath sweaty shirts and mismatched socks in a green plastic laundry basket, he located the jeans he'd worn the morning he stopped at Herkimer's house. The envelope he'd found under the stairs there was still in the hip pocket, rubbed and creased, but there. He took it to the kitchen, got himself hot coffee, and carried it to the old pine chest that served as a sideboard. A telephone squatted there. He lit a cigarette, picked up the receiver, and punched buttons.

Three sturdy, dark-haired boys, maybe six, eight, and ten, kicked a soccer ball around on the patchy gray asphalt of the trail. They gave the green pickup only a glance as he parked it. Their shouts and laughter made him even gloomier. The ball soared up among the pines of the vacant lot, and all three of the kids scrambled up the bank and into the woods after it, crashing through dry underbrush. Bohannon climbed down out of

the truck and headed for the house. On the front deck, two small girls played with dolls on a rumpled rag rug. When he neared the door to knock, the beeping of an electronic game reached him. Colored lights flickered in the room beyond. He knocked. And in a minute, Lena Bianchi came to the door. It took her a moment to make out who he was in the noon brightness. Then her face lighted up in a smile. She opened the screen.

"Mr. Bohannon. How nice to see you."

"Where's Victor?" Bohannon said. "I don't see his van."

"You're so solemn." She frowned. "Is something wrong?"

"This is important. I—hoped he'd be here."

"He will be back tomorrow. He had to drive down to Los Angeles." She gave a little resigned laugh. "Business, business, always business. When he moves up here, there will not be all this strain on him. Come in, come in." She motioned Bohannon inside, into dimness and the restless racket of the game. A girl of perhaps twelve sat on the floor, with grave and intense concentration working a joy stick while angular figures dodged and burst apart on the tube. Her grandmother gave her a loving glance and

led Bohannon to a room at the back of the house, behind the kitchen. It was almost quiet there. "Sit down," she said, eyeing him closely. "You say this is important?"

Bohannon didn't sit. He took a folded paper from his pocket. "I want you to look at this." He held it out.

She took it, looked, and her rawboned body jerked with surprise. She raised her eyes to his. They were filled with dismay. "Where did you get this?" She stared at it again. "How could you? It's some kind of trick. I—" She stopped her words, and thrust the paper stiffly back to him.

He took it, with a sad smile. "You thought you had the only copy anyone would ever see, didn't you?"

"He showed it to me, that wicked, hateful old man," she said. Her voice trembled. "I was out for my walk before bedtime. Always I take a walk. He knew. He was up there on his deck, waiting—and he called to me, 'Signora, I have something you'd better see.'"

"A letter from the late Dr. Steiner's bank in Los Angeles," Bohannon said, "giving Charles Herkimer first option to buy the lot next door, the lot where you'd dreamed of building a house for Victor and your grandchildren. You'd neglected

to keep tabs on the status of the lot, but Charles Herkimer hadn't. He was determined to keep you off it."

"A family should be together," she said stoutly. "What did that coldhearted old man know about such things? Whose own daughter never came to him in twenty years? Who hated children, the sound of children playing. He was a devil."

"After you killed him, you made sure to take the letter so the sheriff wouldn't find it. But you dropped the envelope. And I found that. And this morning I phoned the bank to learn what had been inside it. Papers can be sent quickly these days. The bank faxed it to me at the sheriff's office. It was what I thought it would be."

She sank into a wicker chair. "Why did you think that? We are friends." She looked up at him with tears in her eyes. "Wasn't I always nice to you? You asked for bread, I sent you bread. Why would you think I was a murderer?"

"You were always nice to me," Bohannon said, "and I'll never forget that. But I have my job to do. To keep a young man out of prison for a murder he didn't commit. Lena, a witness heard a woman talking to Herkimer the night he was killed. There were only three

women it could have been. The voices of the other two were the wrong voices. I guessed then whose voice it had to be. I didn't like it. But I knew it had to be yours."

She stared out the window at the trees in the lot next door. "I wanted a house for Vittorio and the young ones. Not two hundred miles away. Next door to me. Close to me."

Bohannon slid the paper into his pocket. "You could have had it. You didn't need to kill him."

Her head jerked up. "What?" She rose trembling from the chair. "What are you saying?"

Bohannon smiled bleakly. "He didn't have any money, Lena. The bank's offer was no use to him. He couldn't buy that lot. He was only bluffing you."

A young woman in jeans and a chambray shirt opened the door and looked in. "Mama—is anything wrong?"

Lena Bianchi turned away from her daughter-in-law. "I must go with Mr. Bohannon," she said, and picked up a shawl. "If I am not back by five, will you start supper, please?"

The young woman looked at Bohannon, alarm in her eyes. "What's happened? It's not Victor. Victor's all right, isn't he?"

"It's not Victor," Bohannon said.

# UNSOLVED

by  
*Robert Kesling*

*Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?*

*The answer will appear in the October issue*

Even though Pogonia was the grape center of the Balkans, its annual Wine Festival was usually as dull as its national product. This year was different. A secret additive transformed the very ordinary Pogonian wine into the finest champagne. The weeklong festival drew wine buyers and wine lovers from many countries, crowding the capital city and scarcely leaving room for the natives to dance to the new prosperity. For the first time in its history, the Metropole, Pogonia's finest (and only) hotel, was accepting only reservations. Almost everyone was overjoyed.

Only Inspector Jocq and his staff of Pogonian Security were worried. The magic formula, now in the safe in the Capitol Building and under armed guard, was a tempting target for all the neighboring rivals of Pogonia. Jocq fully expected each to send its best agent during Wine Festival week. Observing the registration desk of the Metropole Hotel, he found his dire anticipations fulfilled. Despite false names and disguises, Jocq recognized them all—even Mr. Luboff, with his ill-fitting red wig.

They came, the unsavory five, from Ambigua, Borgary, Catalfa, Dumland, and Egerica. One arrived each day of the week, from Monday through Friday. Each agent carried a different concealed weapon; one was armed with his favorite poisoned darts. By week's end, the agents occupied rooms 101, 201, 301, 401, and 501 in the Metropole—rooms that looked out upon the Capitol Building across the plaza.

(1) When the man from Ambigua checked in at the Metropole, the agent with the hatchet was already there. The next day Mr. Nerov arrived.

(2) The agent from Borgary came the day after Mr. Mazuma and was given the room immediately above him. The next day, the man with the pistol checked in. None of the three occupied room 301.

(3) The man from Catalfa, who did not have the hatchet, was assigned the room just above Mr. Karnoy and just below the agent with the pistol.

(4) The agent from Egerica arrived after Mr. Nerov.

(5) The man from Ambigua was not the one armed with the air gun.

(6) Mr. Ochs was already in his room when another agent checked into room 401.

(7) The agent with the knife arrived after the man from Borgary and was given a room higher in the hotel. Neither came on Tuesday.

On Saturday morning the guard was found murdered, his body still warm. A knife was embedded in his back. The safe door was ajar, the precious formula gone.

Inspector Jocq immediately alerted his men in the Metropole: "No time to lose! Go directly to room \_\_\_\_\_ and arrest Mr. \_\_\_\_\_!"

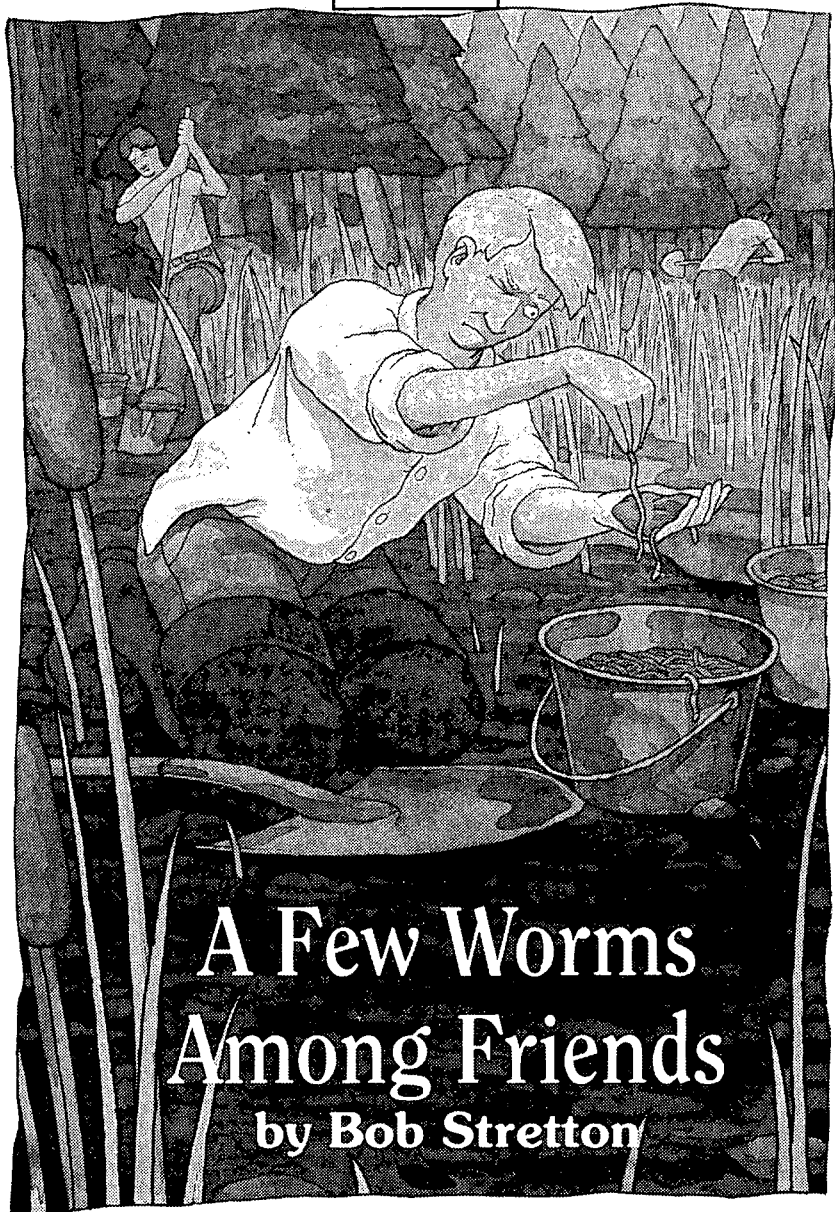
*Who was the guilty agent?*

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*See page 93 for the solution to the August puzzle.*



FICTION



# A Few Worms Among Friends

by Bob Stretton

Illustration by Jim Adams

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**J**ack Keenan thought he was dying or he wouldn't have mentioned the worm story to me at all, but I guess the mystery surrounding the episode had bothered him for the whole of his adult life, and since he'd been a miserable, cantankerous, disagreeable son of a bitch for just as long, he'd decided to inflict his curse on someone else before he checked out for good.

As it turned out, he didn't die as soon as he expected, a fact that disappointed Jack just as much as it did his enemies because he didn't like to be wrong about anything. Anyway, he swore me to secrecy until such time as he actually breathed his last. And since it took me a few weeks of working on the case part time after he finally died to get to the bottom of things, I'm just now able to tell the story.

Jack picked me to ponder the disappearance of the nightcrawlers for two reasons: first, because I've got the reputation in this rural county of being a pretty good detective, and second, because he wanted to get even with me for beating him at poker all these years.

Actually, I'm the first to admit that I'm no Sherlock Holmes, but I have solved my share of puzzling cases in twenty-two years as a deputy sheriff and I always did have Jack's number when it came to poker so I guess I had this one coming.

My involvement in the case began one warm May afternoon while I was at work. I received a radio call to see a complainant at 115 Bluff about a theft. I knew right away that the address was Jack's, since I'd lived next door to him for twenty-some years.

When I drove up, I could see the old man relaxing in a lounge chair on his patio. I walked around to the back of the house and, on the way, was treated to the glorious fragrance of Jack's lilies of the valley, which, by the way, he'd been trying to exterminate for as long as I'd known him. You see, they keep encroaching on his lawn, and Jack doesn't tolerate encroachers of any sort.

As we exchanged neighborly greetings, I noticed that he was wrapped in a blanket even though the full force of the sun was on him and the temperature was at least seventy-five. His face was pale and drawn, his eyes glared out at me from sunken sockets like the glowing orbs in a fake, movie prop skull. Actually, he looked like he was mad about something, so I decided to jump right in and get the tongue-lashing over with.

I started to ask Jack what had been stolen, but he silenced me with an impatient wave of his hand. He then spoke with the deep

voice that I had known for so long but which now seemed to require more effort to operate than he could comfortably muster. "Just shut up and let me tell you the story. It's a mystery that happened better than sixty years ago. I want you to check into it after I'm gone." I pulled up a chair and he began.

"Back during the Great Depression I got a summer job working at the Eagle Lake fishing camp. I was just seventeen, and I'll tell you that working at that resort was the job of a lifetime for a kid in those days. I got to sleep in a room right beside the office, and I got meals for free. Sure, the days were long because I had to be up before dawn to sell bait to the fishermen, but the work was easy, renting boats, selling bait, and sometimes collecting the rent for a cabin if the boss wasn't around. That's all I had to do for a dollar a day, and on top of it, I got to meet the girls who came out to swim.

"By today's standards I know it doesn't seem like much, but in those days a kid was lucky to pick up any kind of a summer job, not to mention one that was fun. Anyway, it had been a dry summer and worms were getting hard to find, and in those days there was no bait wholesaler, you had to dig 'em yourself.

"The soil around the camp was mostly sand, and even though I knew the best places to find worms, our supply had run out. The boss, Kyle Smith, told me that the next day he and I were going over to Ogle County to dig some worms. He said that he knew a boggy place where a fellow could always make a good haul of fishworms. He said we'd take a couple of my buddies along to help dig, and he'd buy lunch and pay them each a dollar. I was to choose the buddies.

"That night I looked up Brian Brown and George McClane, and they jumped at the chance to make a dollar and have an adventure to boot. I told them to bring hip boots, since Kyle had said we'd need them."

I sat there for more than an hour while Jack related the story of how they made the trip to Ogle County and dug four or five pails of fishing worms. He told of how the boss took them to a fancy restaurant and treated them to steak and beer and how the waitresses kept looking them over all the while they were in the place.

He even had a laugh in telling how they had come to the conclusion that the waitresses were interested in them romantically, only to discover that the girls just wondered where they'd come from, since they'd never seen them before. In such ways the fantasies of

teenage boys, and men as well, are often crushed.

I was thinking that the story was pretty good but I didn't see any mystery in it when Jack stopped. I said, "Is that all of it?"

He said, "I'm just getting to the good stuff, but I'm tired, I need a break. Would you get me a beer?"

I knew my way to Jack's kitchen, and in no time I was back with a cold one for him. I would have been back even sooner, but his wife, Betty, had to scold me for trying to kill him off with alcohol. I handed him the beer and he resumed the story.

He told me how he was in a hurry to get back, since he had a date with a girl for a picture show that night. He and Brian and George dumped the worms into the troughs, and he bolted into his room to clean up as soon as they had finished. He went to the show that night and got home pretty late for a kid who had to get up at four A.M. to sell bait.

He slept well and didn't hear a thing until the old alarm clock jangled him awake. He put coffee on and waited for the first fishermen to show up. It was a short wait, and he took the gentlemen's bait canteen to fill it up with worms. He dug into the worm bedding that filled the concrete troughs but came up empty-handed.

He dug here and dug there, and first to his surprise and later to his consternation, he couldn't find a single worm in the troughs. He was beside himself. Hadn't he, Jack Keenan, placed five five-gallon pails of nightcrawlers in these very troughs the afternoon before? He woke up the boss.

They spent the rest of the summer trying to figure out what had happened to those worms. They dismissed the possibility that animals might have eaten them because at least a few would have been left but there wasn't a worm dead or alive in those troughs.

It wasn't possible that the slimy creatures could have escaped because a worm-proof sheet metal barrier had been set into the top edge of the troughs just in case any worms were smart enough to try an escape.

Jack and his boss did give the possibility of theft some thought, but deep down they knew that the dog would have barked at an intruder unless that intruder was someone that the old Chesapeake knew well.

Anyway, Jack told me how the disappearance of those worms ruined his whole summer. He became irritable and suspicious, traits that he would carry into adulthood and, for that matter, until the day he died. He said that he'd finally become so nasty

that he lost his girlfriend over the worm incident and he'd always wondered what his life would have been like if the whole thing had never happened.

Jack finished his story and his beer at the same time. He asked, "Will you try to figure it out for me? It's bothered me all these years. I don't think I'm long for this world, and I'd like you to work on it after I'm gone."

I felt sorry for the old buzzard, so I promised him that I'd do my best to figure out what had happened to those worms. Like I mentioned earlier, he didn't want me to do any digging into the matter until after he was gone, so I promised that too.

As it turned out, he lived for a few more months, so I didn't have to work on anything until recently. I decided that I'd begin the investigation by speaking with Brian Brown and George McClane, since they were the only players in the case who were still alive.

Brian lived with his daughter and son-in-law in a fairly modern ranch type house in one of the newer subdivisions. I rapped on the door on a Saturday afternoon and Julie, the daughter, answered. Julie had the roundish, cute, happy sort of face that everyone refers to as perky. I couldn't help thinking to myself that she could be the prototype for the All-American wife and mother.

I explained why I'd come out, and she said that her dad was watching baseball but she was sure that he'd like to talk about the old days. She showed me into the family room where the old man was engrossed in the Game of the Week. He spotted me and motioned for me to sit. Like most older guys who've done much hunting and shooting, he had the TV volume up high enough that normal conversation was impossible.

At the first commercial break, he shut down the sound, shoved some peanuts my way, and asked if I wanted a beer. Since I was on my own time, I accepted the beer. He said, "Good, my son-in-law doesn't like sports. The only thing he's interested in is making money."

I allowed that making money was important, but he said, "Not if it means neglecting your wife and kids or not having any fun. Life's too short to miss out on all the good times."

I told him the reason I'd come out and the basics of the story that had been related to me by Jack and how Jack had asked me to look into it after he was gone. I explained that I'd come to him because he was one of the boys who'd been on the worm-digging trip.

He said, "Let me try to remember. We'll watch this inning, and I'll think. Maybe by then I can tell you something."

So we watched the inning. The game was pretty good, and I was beginning to think that it didn't make any difference if he could remember now or if it took a few more innings when he said, "I remember that deal. Damn near drove Jack crazy that summer. In fact he got so bad that his girl dumped him."

"I know that much," I admitted, "but what I'm looking for is a reason for someone to steal those worms."

The old man replied, "Check with George. You know, he's my son-in-law's father and the boy's just like him; do anything for a buck; there's no rules for that guy."

I had hoped that the old man would remember something to help me with the puzzle, but sixty years is a long time for anyone to remember details, especially if it didn't happen to him. I asked him, "That's all you can say about it?"

"Sure is, but I'd bet on George if I was you. Why don't you stick around and watch the rest of the ball game? I can use the company."

I considered his offer, since I wasn't feeling a deadline on this case and the day was hot and the beer cold. What the hell, I stayed and watched the game.

Jack's case lay dormant until the following week when I used part of another Saturday to look up George McClane. His house was in a semiwealthy subdivision where most of the homes look like they belong on the grounds of large estates but are actually jammed into normal-sized residential lots where they seem uncomfortably crowded.

I used the brass knocker to pound on George's imitation oak front door, and to my surprise, he answered it himself. He was wearing light blue slacks and a pale yellow golf shirt set off by a white belt and shoes. Anyone who saw him would immediately think used car salesman, which would make them right because that's what he had been for most of his life.

I've never cared much for George McClane, but I have to admit that he's never done anything dishonest in my dealings with him. It's just that he always tries to seem a whole lot richer than he is, and there are always stories about the way he's fleeced the unwary or the unprotected on car deals.

He gave me that salesman's grin and said, "Come on in, Tom, I've been expecting you."



"Did Brian give you a call?" I asked.

"As a matter of fact, he did. He thought maybe I could help you out more if I had some time to think over the worm caper for awhile before you stopped out."

I grinned and said, "That was real thoughtful of him. I don't suppose he actually did it to give you time to make up a good story?"

George laughed his phony laugh. "No need. I didn't have anything to do with what happened to those worms. But I know who did."

I had my doubts, but I decided to play along with him anyway. "Let's hear it," I said.

"Well," he began, "it was like this. When we got back from Ogle County that day, Brian thought it would be a good joke to steal the worms and hide them so Jack would be riled up when he tried to sell them to the fishermen. It was a good joke, but Brian didn't know how much it would bother Jack. He went nuts trying to find them worms, so we made a pact never to reveal what had happened."

I asked him, "What did you get out of it? I know you didn't keep quiet all these years for nothing."

"I got to sell the worms to a dealer from out of town. We had to because we'd have been caught if we'd tried to get rid of them locally."

I thought that over for a few seconds before asking, "What else did you get?" I knew that the price of a few hundred worms back in the Depression wouldn't be enough to keep George locked into a pact of silence for all those years.

There was that smile again. He said, "Just like in the movies, the good guy gets the girl."

"What do you mean by that?" I asked the old shyster.

"Well, Jack was so upset and went so crazy trying to figure out what had happened to those worms that he just didn't have time for his girlfriend any more. I had the time, and I ended up marrying her."

So that was it. What had started out as a prank had changed the course of several lives. Jack's entire life had been altered by those damn worms. I thanked George for telling me the story and returned to Brian's for one more session.

The old man's daughter let me in again, and when Brian saw me, his face fell. He knew that George had spilled the beans. I said,



"Why didn't you tell me what happened to those worms?"

He scratched his chin and glanced around as if he was afraid that someone would overhear before he said, "I guess I just couldn't tell after keeping it secret so long. Besides, I'm ashamed of it."

"You should be. Jack was just about your best friend. Why would you keep something like that from him?"

The old man sighed. "He got so mad about it that I was worried he wouldn't be my friend any more if he knew the truth. You've got to believe me; I only did it as a joke."

I said, "That's the trouble with jokes sometimes; they can get ugly, and when they do, they're not funny any more."

I looked at the old man, and it struck me how like a little boy who'd been caught in a lie he seemed. I said, "I guess that's it then, case closed. It's funny, you and George were the *only* people he never suspected."

He walked me to the door. Just as I was leaving he said, "You know, I was always going to tell him when the time was right. It just seemed like the right time never came around. If he was here now, I'd tell him the whole thing."

I looked him in the eye and said, "He's not here, so it doesn't matter. You waited a little too long to develop a conscience." He was crying when I climbed into my car. Just before I turned the key, I rolled down the window and yelled to the old man, "Who knows? He probably had it figured all along." I guessed it wouldn't hurt the old rascal to stew about that for awhile. After all, he'd left Jack dangling for about sixty years.

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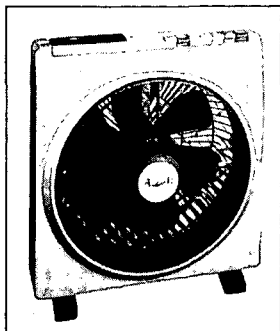
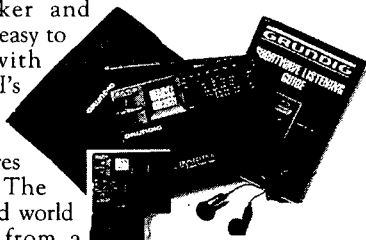
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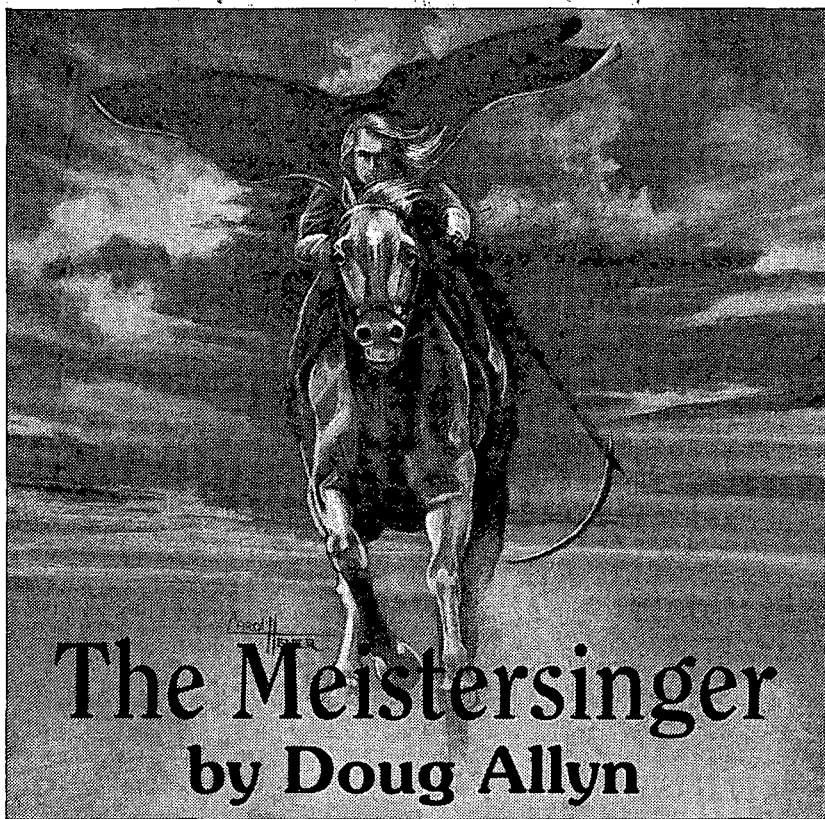


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A wolf was stalking me, angling cautiously through the aspens on the crest of the ridge above the road. I saw a flash of his pelt through the morning mist of the hills. A wary brute. Perhaps too wary for a wolf in this empty land. Wolves grow bold where travelers are few. I slowed my pace, keeping to the center of the dusty track that

passed for a king's highway in the northern Pennines. And in awhile I glimpsed another movement, parallel to the first on the opposite side of the road. And knew they could not be wolves. They would not hunt so far apart.

The one on the ridge moved quickly past me, scouting the road beyond, no doubt, to be certain I was alone. The other

settled in to watch me, almost perfectly concealed in the gorse of the hillside. I made his task easy. I unstrapped my pack and eased myself down at the foot of a huge oak beside the road. I fumbled a crust of bread and a bit of stale cheese from beneath my cloak and made a meal of it. No point in dying unfed. Then I took my lute from its goatskin coat, tuned it carefully, and began to play. A simple country air. One that might soothe a beast. Or a man dressed like one.

Suddenly six armed horsemen materialized before me like ghosts out of the mist, as soundless as spirits. Their horses' hooves were muffled with sheepskins for silence. Two yeomen trailed them, leading three mounts each, also hideshod. A lone youth followed the party afoot, walking backward, sweeping away all traces of their passing with a broom of willow branches.

The mounted men were armed with boar lances and longbows, but this was no hunting party. All of them wore mailed vests beneath their jerkins, and several wore kettle helmets. Their leader wore a helm of the older Saxon style, which masked his eyes with brass. They circled their horses about my tree, and I rose and lightly touched my forelock.

"Good morrow, sirs. You've been blessed with a fair day for the hunt."

The man in the Saxon helmet looked up to the hills. A scout wearing a wolfskin cape rose from the gorse a moment and gave a hand signal. Saxon-helm nodded, and the scout crouched and trotted off, a wolf melting into the mist. "Who are you?" the rider asked, removing his helmet.

"I'm Tallifer of Shrewsbury, my lord. Minstrel and storyteller."

"You are far from your home," he said, glancing about. He was a striking man, sandy-haired with a trim blond beard. He would have been hawkish handsome but for an ugly slash scar that split the bridge of his nose and blinded his left eye. His skin was ruddy, permanently seared by the sun. A crusader, recently returned, if ever I saw one. "What brings you so far north, minstrel?"

"I wander, practicing my trade."

"There is no trade to be found in these hills," he said with a tiger's smile. "No honest trade, anyway." The horseman beside him, a redbearded barrel of a man with huge hands and green Irish eyes, grinned broadly. And I read my death in his smile. "Where are you bound?" Scarface asked.

"I travel north to Berwick," I said. "There is a master minstrel there, a Meistersinger, named Arnim o'Beck. I hope to apprentice myself to him and perhaps improve my station."

Scarface and the Viking exchanged a glance. Scarface cocked his head, the better to read me with his good eye. "You seem a bit long in the tooth for an apprentice," he observed.

"Some men come to their vocations later than others."

"Most of us are born to them," he said curtly. "What is this Arnim o'Beck to you? A kinsman?"

"No, my lord. A friend of years ago," I said.

"Tell me, minstrel," he said, locking his eye on mine, "are you a singer only? Or can you compose ballads as well?"

"I sometimes craft my own songs," I said warily, caught off guard by the question. "They are of little account."

"No matter," he said, straightening. "We are well met, Tallifer of Shrewsbury. I have need of your skills. There has been a great miracle in my town. Someone should sing of it. In fact your friend Arnim o'Beck is already there, at Grahmsby on the Tweed, where we are bound. Choose a horse. You're coming with us."

"But the day is fair, and truly I do not mind the walk."

"We've delayed too long as it is," he said, donning his helmet. "I am Sir Thomas Grahame, minstrel. This road you walk is mine. As you are a free man, I will not order you to come. But if you choose not to, then make your final peace, for a band of angry Scots has dogged our trail all night. And I will leave no one behind who might—sing to them of the road we take. Do you take my meaning?"

"Sir," I said, bowing to Scarface Grahame, and to my fate, "I would be honored to accompany you to the site of a great miracle. Which horse should I take?"

"Any one you like," Grahame smiled, white teeth showing beneath his helmet mask. "But guide your mount by rein only. For some reason they don't seem to understand English."

I rode at the rear of the column, just ahead of the young sweeper who was erasing our tracks. We moved swiftly through the hills, weaving a trail a crookbacked serpent would envy. And in silence. No one spoke, to me or to one another, nor was there so much as a clink of metal on metal. Even their swords and dirks were sheathed in sheepskin.



At midday we broke out of the forest onto a bluff above a small river town. Grahame signaled a halt with his hand, and we waited, wordless, while he scanned the town below. Then he motioned again, and we followed him down the hill. But not all. The two yeomen leading the Scottish mounts had vanished into the wood with their charges.

Viewed from above, the village seemed more heavily fortified than towns in the south of England. It was circled by a stone wall thrice the height of a man, with guardposts at regular intervals. The town gate faced the river so none could come at it straight on, and was guarded by twin towers, eyeless but for arrow-slits. A steel cage hung from the battlements over the gate, offering the remains of some poor wretch as a feast for ravens.

Thatchroofed houses of wattle and daub huddled behind the walls. There was a grist mill driven by a wind wheel, and an alehouse. And dominating the lot was a rude, square Norman fortress, built atop an artificial mound. Up the valley from the town, a large church was abuilding, the dust of stonecutting rising in the noonday sun.

Overall, Grahmsby had a fierce, embattled air, and

rightly so. The border between England and Scotland is only a mark on a map. The line had been redrawn many times, often in blood.

We halted at the town gate while the portcullis was raised from within. Grahame motioned me forward and gestured up at the blackened corpse in the iron cage hanging from the tower.

"Well, minstrel, what think you?"

"I have seen dead men before," I answered. "Even drawn and quartered, such as this poor devil. At the assizes in London they sometimes slaughter a half dozen such in a morning."

"Nay, look more closely," Grahame said. "This man was not executed. He was split, from crown to crotch with a single stroke. A blow delivered by the angel of death himself, they say. From the back of a winged horse. A wondrous miracle."

"I don't understand," I said slowly. "This is the miracle of which you wish me to sing? A corpse in a cage?"

"Not just any corpse. Look again. Don't you recognize him?"

"Recognize him?" I echoed.

"Of course," Grahame said, his eye aglitter behind his helmet slit. "Salute him, minstrel. You look upon the mortal re-



mains of your old friend Arnim o'Beck. The Meistersinger."

**“Y**ou’ve had your jest with me, Sir Thomas,” I said. “I beg your leave to be off.”

“The Muslims say no man is truly free,” Grahame observed. “You certainly are not free at present, nor am I. Sit yourself. Eat. We will talk later.” He eased wearily down before a black-bread trencher laid with cold hare and cheese. Minus his helm, and clad in a leather jerkin and hose any archer might have worn, he seemed almost common, save for his scars.

“Thank you, no, my lord. I’ve no appetite.”

“As you please,” Grahame shrugged, and ripped into the meal, ravenous as a wolf. We’d passed through his town in silence. No shouts of greeting met us, nor even smiles. Villagers lowered their eyes, tugged their forelocks, then shied away from their lord’s company as though we carried pox.

He’d dismissed his band at the castle bailey gate, all but myself and his redbearded second-in-command, a renegade Irishman, Sean Fitzaillech. I’d followed them up to a barren tower chamber where food awaited. Fitzaillech remained in the hall outside, armored

and unfed, guarding the door. Apparently the lord of Grahmsby was a wary man, even within his own walls.

While he ate, I passed the time at the tower window, observing the courtyard below. A score of young men were training at arms under the watchful eye of an elderly marshal. It seemed a great many for so small a town, and the combat was fierce, sword and buckler, lance and war axe. Bruises and welts and curses . . .

“Tell me of yourself, minstrel,” Grahame said around a mouthful of rabbit. “You are well spoke for a vagabond. Have you schooling?”

“I was bodyguard to the son of the Earl of Gloucester. He was schooled at London by scholars so cunning that even a stone statue could learn a bit.”

“Why did you leave his service?”

“The lad took ill, with the bloody flux. And . . . died.”

“And his father blamed you for it?”

“No, the old earl was a fair man. But I could not look on him after without thinking of the boy. And so I took to the road.”

“And now you . . .” Grahame broke off, listening. To angry voices in the hall. Then Fitzaillech opened the door and bowed as a tall, fire-haired

woman swept in. She was dressed in emerald linen, darkly dyed, and her face was flushed nearly as red as her hair.

"My lady," Grahame said coolly, "you honor us. Forgive my not rising. It was a long night."

"So I've been told," she said bluntly. "We had a visitor this morning, Thomas. My cousin Ranald. He carried a message to you from The Bruce and Lord Cummin. A pity you were not here to receive him in person. But in truth, he knew full well you would be away."

"Did he indeed?" Grahame said easily. "My lady, may I present my friend Tallifer of Shrewsbury?"

"Another friend of the road?" she said, scanning me coldly. "And pray, what is your skill, sir? Soldier or thief? Or are you a poisoner perhaps?"

"Nay, ma'am, I'm but a minstrel."

"A minstrel?" she said, paling. "You bring another here, after what befell the last? Thomas, please, I beg you—"

"You mentioned a message," Grahame said, cutting her off. "From your cousin Ranald. Speak. I keep no secrets from my friends. Only my family."

"Ranald brought a warning. The raids must stop. The Scottish lords—"

"Spare me the rest," he said. "Those same lords stood by unconcerned as my herds dwindled while I was in the Holy Land. In any case, I know nought of any raids. We were hawking this morning, far south of the Tweed. Tallifer here will bear me out."

"I'm sure he will," she said bitterly. "But I doubt the lords of the March will be much swayed by the word of a minstrel. Especially while the corpse of your last singer still hangs above the town gate."

"Ah, but he was struck down by the angel of death himself. A miracle, madam. Or so it is said."

"You haven't heard a word, have you?" she said wonderingly, searching his face. "You'll destroy us all, Thomas. Perhaps it's what you want." She turned and stalked out as abruptly as she had entered, pausing a moment in the doorway to look me over. Her eyes were as unreadable as her husband's.

"That was my lady Enid," Grahame said after she'd gone. "Is she fair, would you say?"

"She's . . . lovely indeed," I said, surprised by the question.

"So she once seemed to me," he said, washing down the last of his meal with a great gulp of mead. "I have no sense of it now. I was so long in the desert

even mules began to look lovely. A good woman, though. And chaste. She's borne me five children, one living, but if she were to bathe naked in a stream with the milkmaids with her face covered, I could not pick her body from among them. Except by touch, perhaps. And then only from memory. A distant memory at that. We have been at war, she and I, since my return from the Holy Land. And she's a more formidable opponent than any Saracen I ever fought."

"My lord, I do not understand. Why are you telling me this?"

"Ah, my bluntness makes you uncomfortable," he said, rising, carrying his cup to the window where I stood. "Sorry. I'm a soldier and know more of tactics than tact. And in truth, there is no one here I can speak of openly. You see, I was once a wanderer like you, a landless knight, selling my steel. This town came to me through marriage fifteen years ago and more. For a time things went well. My lady bore me a son, albeit a sickly one. But the next four died aborning. And when Richard's call came for a new crusade, I gladly followed the Lionheart to the Holy Land. I was at Acre, and lost my eye and half my face at Arsouf. For nothing. The crusade failed. I

never even glimpsed Jerusalem. I lost five years and many friends, their blood spilt on the sand. And when I returned, all had changed. And not for the better."

"How so, my lord?"

"I found my herds depleted by John's taxes and my neighbors' villainy, and our landholdings shrunk by a quarter. My lady's old chaplain died, you see, and a new priest arrived, Brother Gaspard. And when word came to my lady that I was sore wounded, this *priest*" (he fairly spat the word) "convinced her that if she ceded land to the church and raised an abbey upon it, all would be well with me. She takes my survival as proof that he spoke true. I do not take it so. In fact, the night I returned, I kicked the good friar down the great hall stairway in front of my wife's guests and kinsman, an act I now regret. Not the kick, only the witnesses. I dishonored our family, and poisoned our marriage. Perhaps forever, for she's of Pictish blood and holds her honor dearer than life. And then a man came up the road, a minstrel of renown who'd been named a Meister-singer by the guild masters of York."

"Arnim o'Beck," I said.

"Your friend," he nodded. "A fine voice, a quick wit. And

through him I thought I might salvage my loss. But instead he was slaughtered, for blasphemy they say. More likely he was murdered."

"Murdered?" I echoed. "Not struck down by an . . . angel?"

"In the Holy Land I heard badly wounded men pray for death many times," Grahame said carefully. "Death came right enough, but seldom swiftly, and ne'er in the form of an angel. Nor were any men split in twain. And yet witnesses, the innkeeper, a master mason, people who've no reason to lie, say the death angel struck down Arnim o'Beck. And his body hangs in the cage of shame above the town gate. As I was not present, I cannot dispute the facts. But perhaps you can."

"Me, my lord? How so?"

"You said you compose songs," he said, loosing a small purse from his belt and handing it to me. "I wish to employ you to compose a ballad of the so-called Miracle of Grahmsby. Naturally you'll have to make inquiries about the incident. And perhaps gain an understanding of what happened. And that's what I really want. The truth of Arnim's death."

"But surely if my lord wishes to know, he has but to ask."

"The people of the town fear me, and rightly," he said. "If I

inquire, they will only babble whatever they think might please me. Perhaps they will be more open with you. Will you do it?"

"I will do what I can," I said, hefting his purse. "I can offer no assurance I'll be successful."

"Oh, I think you will," he said. "On the morrow I will have guests for the feast of Our Lady. You will entertain us with the ballad of the Meistersinger. I care not if you sing it well, or if it rhyme. But by your oath, it must be true. If Arnim's death was miraculous, so be it. But remember, minstrel, to blame an angel for a mortal murder would be blasphemy. And if you've forgot the penalty for that sin, ask your friend Arnim. When next you meet."

**I** saw Arnim o'Beck later that afternoon. Or what remained of him. I left my pack in the bailey guardroom, and carrying my lute in its case, I strolled back to the town gate. To visit an old friend.

It should have been vile to see him so, but in truth, there was little left of the corpse in the cage that was recognizable. Of the man I had known only bones and suet remained. But Arnim was always an affable soul, a master raconteur, and even in death, he told me a few

things. The blow that killed him was indeed savage. He'd been literally cloven in twain, split like a beef, or a man quartered at the assizes.

A miraculous death? Perhaps. The priests say we live in an age of miracles, and the Ar-nim I knew of old was no saint. He was a feckless lout, a wine-bibber, a brawler, a free spirit. If he'd died in a fight over a woman or drowned drunk in a ditch, it wouldn't have surprised any who knew him. But it was hard to believe that the sins would merit the personal attention of the Almighty.

Looking about to be sure I wasn't observed, I knelt and said a silent prayer for his soul. God rest you, singer. Jesu, Mary, save us all. And then I stirred myself and made my way to the village alehouse.

"God bless all here," I said, as I stepped into the dimness. And in truth, the place was busier than one would expect of an afternoon. A half dozen yeomen, their pikes near at hand, were gaming, casting the tiles for coppers at a trestle table in the corner. Two others were seated nearby, workmen from the abbey I judged, from the gray dust ground into their clothing and hands. Both wore bandages, probably earned at their trade. Stone can be an unforgiving medium. I seated my-

self at a table nearest the winecasks. "Landlord, a cup of mead if you will."

"Have you money?" he said, eyeing my cased instrument suspiciously. He was a lanky man, cadaverous, with sunken cheeks and hair the color of moldy hay.

"A little," I said, spilling a few of Grahame's coppers on the table. "Come, join me in a cup. I'm a stranger here."

"I drink with my friends," he said sourly, placing a wooden cup of mead on my table and taking a copper in payment. "I saw you ride in this morning, with Sir Thomas. Who are you?"

"I'm called Tallifer of Shrewsbury," I said, "a minstrel and poet."

"Minstrel?" he echoed nervously, glancing at the guardsmen in the corner. They'd paused at their game, listening. "A word of advice, poet, hie yourself down the road. There's nought to sing of in our town."

"Sir Thomas doesn't agree," I said. "He's commissioned me to compose a ballad on the miracle of Grahmsby, if such it was. I understand you were witness to the event."

"Not really," he said guardedly. "Others were closer."

"Then tell me what you can," I said, adding a copper to the one beside my cup.

"What do you want to know?"

"Everything. The time of day. The events." I added yet another copper.

"It was late," he said, licking his lips nervously. "I know not the hour, but it was well past dark. A black night, a heavy rain. Arnim was in his cups, entertaining the company with songs and stories."

"Were many here?"

"Quite a number. I do a good trade of late, mostly workmen from the abbey." He glanced again at the table of soldiers.

"What happened?"

"There was trouble," the landlord said reluctantly. "Arnim took offense at something Eric Walter, the master mason said. A jest. They stepped out in the street to settle it."

"With blades?"

"Nay, Sir Thomas allows no weapons here, save those of his own men. They fought unarmed, with fists. Arnim was quicker. He beat the mason senseless. If he'd gone then, perhaps all would have been well. But he came back in, defying Eric's men. And he, ah . . ."

"Go on, please."

"He sang a song, a blasphemous lay, about women and priests. Brother Gaspard was enraged, and—"

"You mean the priest was here? In an alehouse?"

"There's nothing untoward in that. Many workmen are housed in cottages around the town. He often comes here to discuss the next day's tasks with Eric, and perhaps take a cup. Or two."

"I see. Go on."

"The stoneworkers were already angry with Arnim for the thrashing he gave Eric, and when he deliberately provoked Gaspard, several of them advanced on him. He pulled a dirk from beneath his cloak and backed them down. Then he tossed me a gold piece and left. I didn't actually see what happened, but I heard him cry out. And when I reached him he'd been . . . well, you saw his bones."

"So you didn't actually see the . . . miracle?"

"I saw enough," he said. "I saw the horse."

"What horse?"

"The flying horse," he said defiantly. "It flew away in silence, into the mist."

"A flying horse," I repeated. "You mean a Pegasus? A horse with wings?"

"I saw no wings. But the night was heavy with fog, perhaps he had them."

"I see. And what of the rider?"

"Ah, well," he nodded with an oily smile. "They say it was the angel of death."

"And did you see this angel?"

"Nay, I did not. But others did."

"What others?"

"The mason, Eric Walter, and Brother Gaspard. And . . . my serving wench, Rowena."

"They actually saw the angel?"

"So they said," he said, making a grab for the coppers. But I was quicker. I clamped his right hand at the wrist. And realized he'd been maimed, his thumb and forefinger had been hacked off, and the wound cauterized with an iron.

"What happened to your hand?" I asked.

"I were an archer, a long-bowman for Lady Grahame's father," he said, yanking his three-fingered paw free of my grasp. "I were captured by Scots on a raid. And they made certain I'd ne'er, again, let fly arrow against them. And now Sir Thomas raids their herds to recoup what he lost while he was off a-crusading. His recklessness will bring the Scots of the north down on us like wolves."

"Is that why people fear him?" I asked. "Because of the raids?"

"That and more. He smote the priest, and he opposes the building of the abbey, a project that offers God's honest work to honest men. And now his friend

the singer has been struck down. Perhaps his death was a warning."

"A warning for whom? Grahame?"

"I know not. Such things are too deep for me. But tell your master I believe the angel of death did visit our town. Tell him I'll swear it if need be. On the rack, I'll swear it."

"Why swear to what you didn't see?" I asked.

"Just tell him what I've said."

"I will," I said, still puzzled. "Now perhaps you'd be kind enough to show me what you did see. Show me where you saw this flying horse. And where the Meistersinger died."

There was nothing to see, really, a narrow mud lane bordered by huts, a low wall at the end of it, and a gate that led to the river and the castle road beyond. A sorry enough place to die, but as good as any other, I suppose.

The innkeeper said both the priest and the stonemason who'd witnessed Arnim's death would be found outside the town where the new abbey was going up, but I didn't go directly to the site. Every English town has its butts, an archery range, for sport and practice at arms, but the range at Grahamsby was exceptionally



large for an upland village. And much more than archery was being taught.

The young men I had seen practicing swordplay in the courtyard earlier were hard at it in the field now, some mounted, charging a quintain with lances, or battling each other with blunt mace and wooden axe. Others worked with the longbow or javelins, loosing volleys on command. This was not sport, it was war, in all but blood and fire. And above the dust and shouted commands was a familiar figure. Sean Fitzaillech, Grahame's Irish mercenary, was seated on a stout mountain pony calmly overseeing the carnage.

"Good day, minstrel," he called as I made my way up the low bluff to see him. "And how goes your unicorn hunt?"

"Unicorn?" I said, standing beside his mount.

"Aye, that's what truth is, is it not? A unicorn? Especially the truth of a miracle. Everyone says they be real, many claim to have seen them. But whene'er I see the horn of a unicorn displayed at a festival, it looks much like the horn of a goat that's been softened in neatsfoot oil and straightened with an iron rod."

"Perhaps you're right," I acknowledged. "And what can

you tell me of the truth of Grahmsby's miracle?"

"Nought firsthand. I was in the bailey barracks that night, drunk as a tinker's bitch. Had I been with Arnim, he'd not have died alone in that lane. Some of them would have gone with him," he said, gesturing up the valley toward the abbey site.

"Them? You mean the stoneworkers?"

"Nay, the soldiers that guard the place."

"I saw a few in the town," I said. "I thought they were Sir Thomas's men."

"Nay, minstrel. They're mercenaries, hired by the abbot at Rievaulx to protect the abbey here while it's abuilding."

"Protect it from whom?"

"From whatever band of raiders smashed the site a few nights after Sir Thomas's trouble with the priest," the Irishman said blandly. "Odd, don't you think, that the abbot didn't ask him to furnish men to guard it. Especially since he's paying for its construction with an extra manorial tax."

"I don't understand," I said slowly. "What's afoot here, Irishman? What have I walked into?"

"A war," Sean said cheerfully. "A feud between Sir Thomas and his wife's Scottish kinsmen, who fattened their holdings at his expense while

he followed the cross, and war between him and the churchman Gaspard, who tricked Lady Grahame into financing an abbey that looks more like a fortress each day it rises."

"But why should the church want a fortress here?"

"Lead," he said. "There are mines on the edge of Sir Thomas's land to the east. Lead is sorely needed in England and on the Continent to roof great cathedrals and castles."

"But if it's on Sir Thomas's holdings . . ."

"Land belongs to him who can hold it, and take the word of an old soldier, minstrel, whoever holds yon abbey when it is finished will eventually control the mines beyond."

"God's footstool," I said softly. "And do you think Arnim's death is somehow tangled in this?"

"Aye," Sean said thoughtfully, "but perhaps not in the way you think. Look, minstrel, at the lad in armor at the far butts. He's Sir Thomas's son and heir, Edwin. A sorry spectacle, is he not?"

The Irishman was right. The youth was hurling war javelins at a target only forty yards off, but his aim was poor and his arm too weak to make the distance. A crippled youth, supported by a crutch, scrambled after the lances and tossed

them back to his master. The cripple's off-balance throws were truer than young Grahame had managed with two good legs beneath him.

"Another battleground, those two," Sean said. "Look at them two, alike as peas, but for the crutch. The crippled lad is Sir Thomas's bastard, shunted here in his absence when the boy's mother died. Lady Grahame took him in, treats him well enough. But he is a pawn in the battle between them. Their son, Edwin, the boy in armor, wishes to be a priest. In truth, it would suit him. He has no aptitude for arms. But if he gives his soul to God, his body goes with it, leaving Sir Thomas no heir. So the lad trains as a soldier, and Griff the bastard fetches and carries for him, and my lord and lady scarcely speak to one another."

"You said you thought Arnim was mixed in all this somehow. In what way?"

"I'm not sure," he said, cocking his head, glancing down at me. "But he was. Sir Thomas is a wary man, not given easily to friendship, but he and Arnim were thick as thieves the few days before his miraculous slaughter."

"And you don't believe in the miracle?"

"In truth, I'm not sure of that either. Have you spoken to Eric Walter, the master mason?"

"The man who fought with Arnim that night?"

"Aye. A stolid man, Eric, dense as the stone he works. He's not a man given to fancies, but he believes in the miracle. He saw it. Or at least he saw something. And as a soldier, I wonder myself how a man could be cleaved near in half in a town with no weapons."

"The church mercenaries have weapons, and they apparently hang about the alehouse when not on duty."

"A rabble. Villeins and clods in holy livery," he shrugged, dismissing the idea. "Untrained pikemen to awe the simple folk. Perhaps you could cleave a man with a pike, but you'd have to get him to hold still first, and Arnim was deft of foot and fist. Anyway, they have no horses. Certainly none that can fly. If the time comes, these lads of mine will go through them like grain through a goose."

"But surely you don't want war with mother church?"

"With the church or the devil himself, minstrel," he said cheerfully. "To a man like me, the ring of steel on steel jingles as sweet as coins in a purse. A word of advice, Tallifer. Arnim o'Beck had brass in his pocket when he died, as you have now. In a few days, his bones will tumble through the bars, emp-

tying the cage. Take care, lest its next tenant be another singer."

He spurred his mount down the bluff, cursing the efforts of the boy in armor, nearly riding down the burly cripple. The boys had more in common than family resemblance. The face of Grahame's heir was nearly as hopeless as his half-brother's. But it was the crippled boy's eyes that haunted me as I made my way down the bluff toward the abbey site.

The Irishman was right about one thing. The abbey would indeed resemble a fortress when it was finished. The site was guarded by pikemen even now. The walls were being built doubly thick and filled with rubble, and the lancet windows at the lower levels were no larger than arrow slits. God's servants would be protected by more than their faith in this place, and at the pace the workmen were being driven, one would think Satan himself was lurking about. Or perhaps the angel of death.

I found Eric Walter, the master mason, at a drawing table set near the abbey door. He was as Sean described him, a block of a man, square of face and body, the dust of granite ground into his rough leather jerkin and cap. He was cursing

an apprentice about the scaffolding for the bell tower.

"An impressive structure," I said, after he dismissed the lad. "When it's finished it'll afford a hawk's eye view of the whole valley."

"It'll also hold bells," Eric Walter said. "Who might you be?"

"Tallifer is my name. Of Shrewsbury."

"Well, if you want work, we've got it. Have you a craft?"

"None so grand as yours. I'm a minstrel, and poet."

"What mischief is this?" he said, his eyes narrowing. "What do you want?"

"To speak with you. Sir Thomas has commissioned me to compose a ballad about the miracle. And you were witness to it."

"Aye, I was. Or at least what I could see of it, lying in the street with my head drumming like a mallet on stone."

"From the fight, you mean?"

"Aye. He thrashed me, fair and square, the Meistersinger. I'm no sluggard with my fists, can't be in a trade like mine, but I'll own he was too quick for me. Like fighting a shadow. One minute I'm swinging at his head, the next I'm aground, trying to remember my name."

"What happened?"

"What do you think?" Walter snapped. "I tired of fighting and

took a short nap. When I woke, Arnim was there, helping me to stand. And, ah . . ." He swallowed, and crossed himself. "And the angel of death flew at us out of the dark."

"Flew?" I echoed.

"Aye, flew. Through the fog and the rain with scarce a sound. And Arnim pushed me aside and tried to scramble away as it bore down on him. I saw him scream, but his cry was drowned in thunder. And in the next flash the horse had gone, and the singer was . . . God's eyes, it curdles my guts to think of it."

He'd gone ashen as he spoke, and my doubts drained away with the blood from his face. He was an honest man, and he was speaking the truth. As he knew it.

"Did you see the angel?" I asked.

"Aye, I saw him right enough."

"Him? It was a man?"

"I'm . . . not sure. It were dark, I saw him for a moment only, and I was still shaky on my legs. But I recognized him, from illustrations and such. The angel of death. It was the first thing I said."

"And I agreed," a man said from behind me. "I saw him as I came to Eric Walter's aid. It was indeed God's own dark messenger."

"Good day," I said, turning to face a sleek, solidly built man in the simple robe of a country friar.

"I am Brother Gaspard," he said, offering his hand, "and you must be the minstrel from Shrewsbury. Tallifer, is it? Named for him who led the charge at Hastings?"

"For him, and countless since," I said. "I'm sorry to trouble you, brother, but Sir Thomas—"

"We've heard of his charge to you," Gaspard interrupted briskly. "But as you see, we are very busy with God's own work."

"And the slaughter of Arnim the Meistersinger? Was that God's work as well?"

"So it would seem, minstrel. A miracle, they say."

"It's said his offense was blasphemy. In what way?"

"He sang a vile ballad," Brother Gaspard said coldly. "One meant to offend me personally, and to cast aspersions on our work here."

"Forgive my ignorance, brother, is singing a bawdy verse a mortal sin?"

"Who can understand the way of God's vengeance?" Gaspard said. "His wrath is often swift and terrible. And the proof hangs above the town gate. I'm sorry, but we can spare you no more time."

"One last question if I may, brother. What was the fight about? The one that sent Arnim and Eric Walter into the street that night?"

"It were a jest," Walter began, but the priest cut him off with a hard glance.

"It was just an alehouse brawl," Brother Gaspard said. "An imagined slight, much ado about nothing. Why do you ask?"

"Curiosity," I said. "Thank you for your time."

"Wait, I'll see you past the sentries," Gaspard said, matching his stride to mine. "Will you see Sir Thomas soon?"

"I don't know," I said. "Perhaps."

"Then give him this message. I've received word that he's petitioned the abbot at Rievaulx to relieve me of my post. It's his right, of course, the land is his. But tell him I wish him to withdraw his request. Say . . . that the miracle of Grahmsby will remain so if he will do as I ask."

"I don't understand," I said.

"Nor does a pigeon," he said. "But they carry messages all the same. Do as you're bid, singer." He turned and stalked off without waiting for my answer. Beyond him, the construction of the abbey-fortress continued at a killing pace, stone dust and the shouts of

workmen rising in the clear northern sky.

**T**he hut of Rowena, the serving wench, was a bit of a surprise, neatly kept and slightly larger than its neighbors on a narrow lane near the river. A woman's voice was singing within, clear and sweet, an old air, Celtic, I think. The song ended with my knock, and I was sorry it did. It was the first pleasure I'd had since coming to this place.

"Yes?" She was handsome in an almost mannish way, wide shoulders, sandy hair, a spray of freckles on her forehead. She was clad in a simple muslin gown, sky blue. Her cheeks still glowed with the blush of youth. Her eyes were gray, and much older.

"I beg pardon, ma'am, but I—"

"I know who you are," she said curtly. "The innkeeper said you might come round. What do you want?"

"A word or two about the miracle."

"A word is all I can offer," she said. "I saw little in the dark and the rain. What would you have me say about it?"

"The truth of what you saw."

"Truth," she echoed dryly. "You ask much, minstrel. Truth is valuable to a woman

like me. It is given to me so rarely."

"I have a few coppers," I said.

"Coppers? Is that all he gave you? Did he give you no . . . instructions about me?"

"No, he only asked me to write a ballad about the death of Arnim o'Beck, to discover the truth of it if I can."

"Then God help us both, minstrel. You want truth? Here is a truth. We must leave this place while we can. I have kin to the north in Strathclyde. We will be protected there."

"I don't understand. Protected from what?"

"You fool," she said icily. "Don't you understand? He's using you, minstrel. As he did Arnim. And unless we fly now, we'll end the same."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I cannot go, I've given my word. Nor do I understand why you are afraid. Sir Thomas said nothing of you to me."

"Aye, and that's the point," she said, her face sagging, aging a decade in an instant. "He's done with me. As he was with Arnim."

"They say Arnim had gold the night he died," I said slowly. "Did it have something to do with you?"

"It was a parting gift, for my silence and for . . . my friendship," she nodded grimly. "Ar-

nim was going to take me away."

"And you were willing to go?"

"Willing? I was eager. I'm no maiden, minstrel, I've known men, though none since Sir Thomas fancied me. I thought I was lucky at first. I thought I'd snared a right rich prize, scarred face or no. But in truth he cared nothing for me. Or for any woman but his wife. His eye terrifies me. Not the ruined one, the other."

"Why? What do you see there?"

"Nothing," she said flatly. "It's as empty as the desert. I think his soul died in the Holy Land the day King Richard slaughtered his prisoners at Acre. He said once his scars were God's vengeance for his part in the killing, like the mark of Cain. He thinks the scars are the reason Enid will have none of him since his return."

"But you do not?"

"Nay. Men say, do they not, that in the dark one woman is like another? Well, it is the same with us, minstrel. She does not hate him for scars, honorably got. It's the shame of his crippled bastard being left at her door while he was gone."

"But surely siring a woods colt isn't a mortal sin, even in this backwater."

"It might not be if the lady had not lost so many of her own. And if she had not purchased her husband with a dowry of land. She's of Pictish blood, and honor is everything to them. That's why she took the lad in rather than driving him off. And he's truly what stands between them now. Him, and perhaps me. Until Sir Thomas gave Arnim gold to get me gone."

"But if he paid Arnim to see you safely away, why do you think you're in danger now?"

"His eye may be gone, but his ears work well enough to hear laughter."

"You speak in riddles, woman."

"Aye, and so did Eric Walter. It's what sent them into the street that night. A riddle that's spread around the village like pox."

"What riddle?"

"An evil one. Tell me, minstrel, what beast has one eye and four horns? The answer: a one-eyed knight, who wears cuckold's horns both for his lady and his whore. The jest is all over the village. He must have heard it. And you can imagine his rage."

"What are you saying?" I said, grasping her shoulders roughly. "Who did you see in the street that night?"



"I saw an angel of death!" she spat defiantly. "On a great black steed. I saw a damned miracle!"

She would not be swayed from her story. I stayed nearly an hour but could not move her. She did consent to hum the air that Arnim sang that night that so enraged the stoneworkers. It was a tune I recognized, "Women and Wine," a bawdy ballad popular with crusaders, though perhaps it was unfamiliar this far north, since Rowena said she'd not heard it before. And I doubt much escaped the lady's notice. She was as bright and hard as a Saracen blade. And in her own way, just as dangerous.

It was nigh on dusk when I trudged thoughtfully back to the town. The sun was a fiery eye dying in the western hills, but high on the wall the cage of shame was still bathed in a bloody glow of rage and shadow, a mirror of my own heart.

Twice I had to step off the road to let parties of horsemen pass, noble guests for the morrow's feast. But there was no gaiety in the air. Lady Grahame's Scottish kinsmen brought few women with them, and far more men-at-arms than were necessary for safe passage down from their northern lairs.

They were a battle-hardened, well-armed lot, their eyes searching the hills as they rode, probably seeking their missing mounts. They would be a difficult audience to please on the morrow. But that was the least of my troubles.

Of far greater import was the matter of the song. Sir Thomas had hired me to compose a ballad, and to seek out the truth of the Grahmsby miracle, if such it was. I had spoken to all who were present that night and claimed to have seen the angel. And of the lot, I believed only one. Eric Walter. He who first gave a name to what he saw. And called it the angel of death.

Any of the others might lie for reasons of their own, Rowena for fear, Brother Gaspard for power, but not the master mason. He had neither motive nor imagination. A stolid man, the Irishman called him, as dense as the stone he worked. And he was right. Eric had been unsteady with drink that night, and had been soundly drubbed by Arnim, but I felt he was at heart an honest man who'd told me the truth of what he saw. And his fear was real as well.

And yet I did not believe him. Others had seen the spectre also, and called it an angel, but their fear was of a man. Possibly the one who gave me this

task. Could it have been Sir Thomas in the street that night? That he was capable of slaughter there was no doubt. And he was certainly canny enough to use me as a stalking horse, to learn what the witnesses had seen.

But the flaw of that thought was that if he wanted the witnesses intimidated, why send me? Himself or Fitzaillech would have been more effective. Any road, it came back to Eric. And when he saw the rider in the lightning flash, he did not say it was Sir Thomas. He said it was the angel of death.

Could he be right? I certainly hoped not. For if Arnim o'Beck was struck down by a vengeful God, then I might as well be next. For I was surely guilty of sins greater than singing a bawdy ballad. Perhaps that's why I chose not to accept Eric Walter's version of the miracle, though I knew he believed he spoke true.

And so that evening, I sought out the Irish mercenary, Sean Fitzaillech, and we whiled away an hour and more, with talk of politics, and women, and honor and war. And long after most townsmen and castle guests were asleep, I strolled about with my lute, chatting with those who labored late, cooks and pantlers preparing for the

next day's feast, stable grooms who slept with Sir Thomas's mounts, and the watchmen who still patrolled the village wall, though he now faced more enemies within than without.

But in the end, while I found them entertaining and enlightening, they could not truly help me with my task. There was only one man in this godforsaken hamlet who had mastered the arts of balladry. The one whose talent and skill had been recognized by the guild masters.

So I bribed the gate guard to pass through, and settled myself with candle and lute, beneath the cage and the bones of my old friend Arnim o'Beck. I stayed the night there, resting with my back to the wall, remembering Arnim as he was years ago, his easy laughter, his charm, his deftness with lute and lyric.

And sometimes I dozed, and dreamed of Arnim in his cage, and of dark angels, and death. And I would wake, and ponder, and play a little. And by morn, as the first hint of light silvered the edge of the world, I had finished his song. "The Ballad of the Meistersinger."

And I rose and carefully tuned my instrument, and then began to sing, softly, softly, in the grim shadow of his cage, my elegy and farewell to him. A

finer song than I'd ever writ before or would again, sung soul to soul, one wanderer to another. And as the sun broke bloody in the hills, and the stench of Arnim's bones called the ravens to their feast, the song ended. It was my parting gift to my friend of old. It was his now. His, and his alone. I would never sing it to anyone else.

**T**he floors of the castle's great hall had been newly strewn with woven rushes, and the scent of them mingled with the steaming platters of game and beef, served on coarse bread trenchers.

Sir Thomas and his lady were seated at the high table, with her cousin Ranald and other kinsmen. Feasts are often tailor's tourneys with guests vying to outdo one another in the intricacies of their finery, but there was none of that here. Grahame had yielded to convention in that he wore a cloak of velvet embroidered with silver, but his doeskin jerkin was plainly visible beneath. Lady Grahame's Scottish and Pictish kin were similarly unfashionable. Many wore animal pelts with their clan tartans, as though they'd come for a council of war rather than a holiday. Perhaps they had.

Only Brother Gaspard was finely arrayed, wearing a richly embroidered robe and cap, more suitable for a bishop than a friar. By right, as chaplain to the Grahames, he should have been seated with the family, but chose instead to share a table with Eric Walter and a number of his master craftsmen. Several of Grahame's riders I'd met the first morning were also there, seated at the low table with Fitzaillech.

With the feast well under way, four jugglers from Flanders were the first to entertain, but to little effect. The anger loose in the great hall was as fierce as a living thing. The poor devils could have juggled wild horses with their manes afire and not pleased this crowd. The jugglers cut their show short and exited, their fixed smiles fading the moment they left the hall, cursing their luck and each other in their own tongue. And then it was my time.

In balladry, as in battle, boldness is all, or nearly so. I strode to the center of the great room as though it was but a country tavern and I a prince of the East. I bowed to Sir Thomas and to the assembly, then struck a ringing chord on my lute.

"My lords and ladies, honored guests, I bid you welcome

in the name of our host, Sir Thomas Grahame and his lady. Or perhaps you should bid me welcome, as I am the stranger here. I am called Tallifer of Shrewsbury, a minstrel late of London and York, and every ratbitten hamlet between. I am a singer and storyteller and poet, and ordinarily I would share the news I've gleaned in my travels. But this is not an ordinary day. Nor an ordinary feast. We are met, my lords, in a time of miracles. Aye, I said miracles, for there have been several in Grahmsby of late. Sir Thomas has employed me to compose a ballad of the Grahmsby miracle, but I, poor fool, am sore confused, for miracles abound in this land like lilies in France. Which one to sing of first? Perhaps this good company can help me choose?"

I had at least aroused their curiosity a bit. Even the Scots slowed at their feeding, no small courtesy to an Englishman from the south.

"The first miracle I encountered was almost biblical, not unlike the miracle of loaves and fishes. Though in this case, it is a miracle of beeves and horses. For behold, a crusader returns from the wars, and his herds begin to multiply, growing in numbers almost . . . nightly. Perhaps soon they shall regain their former

strength. Would this not be miraculous?"

No one answered. I had their attention now, by God. The entire assembly was struck dumb, with surprise and anger. Lord Ranald and his Scots were exchanging glances, and I think a false word could have plunged the room into open war.

"But, of course, that's not the only miracle that might deserve a song," I continued hastily. "Another is the great abbey which is abuilding to the east of us. When it is finished, it may be transformed into a fortress with but a word from its abbot. And would this not be miraculous?"

"You tread on dangerous ground, minstrel," Brother Gaspard said, rising, his face flushed near as dark as his robe. "Beware you do not stumble into blasphemy."

"Ah, you are quite right, good friar," I said. "My mind is so bedazzled by the many miracles I've encountered that I forget my place. I am here to entertain, and so I shall. I should like to begin with a song, a ballad of the road entitled 'Women and Wine.'"

I struck a chord on my lute, played a bit of filigree around the melody to come, and began:

"O come, wand'ring soldiers,  
Calais to the Rhine,

"And raise up our cups, to women, with wine—"

"Nay, stop!" Eric Walter shouted, bolting up from his seat. "Are you mad? It's blasphemy! That's the air Arnim o'Beck sang the night he was struck."

"So I've been told," I agreed. "And yet I don't fear to sing it. I have done so before, you see. Perhaps a hundred times or more. It's a marching song, popular with crusaders. If singing it was an offense against God, then half the men who took up the cross would be dead."

"Half of them *are* dead," Graham observed dryly.

"But surely not for singing, my lord," I said. "I'll wager there are men in this room who sang that song on the road to Jerusalem and back. Perhaps even yourself?"

"Aye," he admitted, touching his savaged eye, "I sang it. Perhaps that's why I have difficulty reading the markings on horses and beeves of late."

"I've sung it as well," Sean Fitzaillech offered, "and I'm unmarked, as any number of town lasses can verify."

"To have sinned and escape God's wrath is no cause for glee," Brother Gaspard said archly. "The Almighty deals with sinners in his own good time."

"Truly spoken," I said. "But it is also true that the Almighty seldom deigns to deal with the sins of men through the intercession of angels. Nor did he in Grahmsby. Arnim o'Beck was not struck down by an angel, brother, as you well know. He was killed by a man, one presently under this very roof."

"What deviltry is this? It was an angel. Eric Walter himself—"

"Was in his cups, and had taken a fearful thrashing. If he made an honest mistake, none could fault him. But you were sober, brother, were you not? So tell us, who did you see strike Arnim o'Beck? And remember, you were not the only witness."

"So that's it," Gaspard spat. "The aleseller and his wench spin you a tale for gold, and you would take their word over mine?"

"No, brother, of course not. But suppose the man who killed Arnim were to confess his crime, here, on his oath before this company. Would you still claim it was a . . . miracle?"

Gaspard hesitated, licking his lips. His eyes darted involuntarily to the high table. "It, ah, it was a vile night," he said, swallowing. "Perhaps I was mistaken about the angel."

"I don't understand," Lady Grahame said. "You told me you saw it, brother. You said it was God's justice."

"Be not too harsh with him, my lady," I said. "He was only protecting you. Isn't that so, brother?"

"Aye," he said reluctantly, "I was indeed. Protecting you."

"Protecting me?" Lady Grahame said, her eyes widening with anger. "With lies?"

"Hold," Eric Walter said stubbornly. "I care not how dark it was, or what the others say. I know what I saw."

"You do indeed, master mason," I said, "and you are an honest man, as all here know. But even an honest man can make an honest mistake. For example, you thought you saw a flying horse. And in a way, you did. The steed that rode down Arnim seemed to float toward you in total silence. To float because of the fog, and in silence because of the storm, and . . ." I drew a pair of sheepskin hoofpads from beneath my cloak and dropped them on the floor. "And because its hooves were muffled. I found those in the stables, kept there no doubt for mounts that are . . . sore of foot. If you look closely, you'll see they're still spattered with Arnim's blood."

"But the animal truly flew. I saw it."

"So it did. It leapt the wall at the end of the lane, and vanished into the mist. And thus seemed to fly away."

"Perhaps so," he nodded slowly, "but the angel?"

"Ah yes, the angel. That troubled me at first because Arnim was split like a grape, which meant a weapon must have been employed, yet the populace is unarmed. Nor did you mention seeing a weapon capable of inflicting such a wound, like a blade or war axe. Instead you believed you saw the angel of death itself. Not St. Michael with his sword, or St. George with his lance, but Death. Because Death's weapon is a scythe. Isn't that what you saw in the lightning flash. A pale face? Swinging a scythe?"

"Aye," Eric Walter said, frowning, "I believe it was."

"So there was no miracle. There was a tragedy, a good man cut down by a youth defending his father's honor with the only weapon he could lay hand to—"

"Nay," said Brother Gaspard, lunging to his feet, "I see your game plainly now, minstrel. You lay the father's crime on the boy to keep the lad from the priesthood."

"What?" Grahame said, paling as though he'd been struck. "You dare say that I killed Ar-

nim? By the rood, Gaspard, priest or no, I'll see your guts for this!"

"Nay, my lord," Lady Enid said, fiercely clamping his wrist, "this is my doing. I believed you, Gaspard, when you said the abbey was God's price for his return. I even sided with you against my husband. But you have overstepped yourself."

"My lady, you don't understand," Gaspard pleaded. "I saw your husband that night. And others did, too. You are too trusting."

"Trusting?" she echoed bitterly. "If you think that, then you are a fool as well as a liar, Gaspard. I'd sooner trust a Saracen than my husband. And so I have him watched. And I know beyond doubt that he had no part in the killing of the singer. As to what you claim you saw, it matters not. You are forsworn, priest. First you cry miracle, now you cry murder before my guests and kinsman? By God's eyes, sir, if tomorrow's sunset finds you on our land, I'll see you buried in it. Now go, while you can!"

Gaspard started to protest, then faltered. It was hopeless. Lady Grahame's eyes were as merciless as a she-bear with cubs. She had promised him death, and she meant it.

"You've not heard the last of this," he said, wheeling and stalking out.

"My lords, ladies, and guests," Lady Grahame said calmly, "There is food and wine aplenty, and the jugglers will rejoin us presently. Enjoy yourselves, please. And you, minstrel," she said, piercing me with her glance. "A word. In private."

As I turned to follow her, the Irishman Sean Fitzaillech rose with a wolfish grin and began to applaud, one pair of hands clapping in the great hall. No one joined in, but he continued anyway. The lonely sound of it hounded me out of the room.

"How much gold did my husband promise you for this farce?" she said icily.

"Farce, my lady?" We three were alone in the anteroom off the great hall. A counting room, with a desk and a rack against the wall that held rolls of vellum. Sir Thomas stood at the window, staring out into the dark, content to leave his lady to deal with me."

"Yes, farce," she repeated. "You did him service by unmasking the priest as a liar, but you used lies in the doing of it."

"I beg pardon, my lady, but I did not lie."



"Do you truly claim my son struck down Arnim o'Beck? It can't be so. Edwin couldn't harm a soul if his life depended on it."

"I didn't say it was your son, ma'am. I said a son defending his father's honor. In fact it was Sir Thomas's . . . other son."

"Griffin?" she said, disbelieving. "But he's a cripple. He can scarce walk unaided."

"But he can ride," I said. "Sean Fitzailch says the boy rides like a centaur, and his upper body is developed far beyond the ordinary because of his infirmity. Which is why he was mistaken for his father from the back that night."

"But why? What harm did Arnim ever do to Griffin?"

"None that I know of, my lady. It was . . . a matter of honor. There was talk in the village that Arnim had . . . given offense."

"By cuckolding my husband?" she said coldly. "Doubly?"

"Yes, my lady," I said, swallowing. "Just so."

"God's eyes," she sighed, "what a shambles. Poor Arnim."

"He was not totally blameless in this," I said. "If he'd simply taken the girl away as he was bidden, instead of flaunting his purse at the ale-

house, he might have escaped unscathed."

"Purse?" Grahame said, turning from the window. "What purse?"

"The money I gave him," Lady Grahame said bluntly. "To go, and take your strumpet with him."

"But why did you bother, madam, when you've no use for me yourself?"

"Possibly I have been heeding . . . poor advice from our former chaplain about a great many things. Perhaps we should discuss our circumstances, at length. But later, and not in front of a stranger. And now, by your leave, gentlemen, I must see to my guests." She paused as she strode by me, to look into my face a moment, reading me. Then nodded. "Whatever you pay him, Thomas," she said quietly, "add something for me. He's earned his wage, this minstrel of yours. Though in truth he scarce sang a note." And then she was gone.

Sir Thomas opened a drawer of the desk, took out a purse, and tossed it to me.

"You've already paid me, my lord."

"Take it as a farewell gift. You rid me of an enemy today, minstrel, but made more than a few of your own. The priest has allies in the town, an army

of them. It will not be safe for you here. Choose a horse from my stable. One strong enough to ride double. And when you go, take the girl Rowena with you. I may never win a war with my lady, but perhaps I can buy a truce."

"As you wish, my lord. What, um, what will be done with the boy?"

"Griffin, you mean? I haven't thought on it. Why?"

"If I may be so bold, sir, you have one son who wishes to be a priest, and an abbey abuilding that will soon need an abbot. And you have another son, born a bastard perhaps, but with heart and belly enough to kill for you. It is something to consider, is it not?"

"But the man he killed was your friend. Why should you speak on the lad's behalf?"

"Perhaps because Arnim was my friend, I'd hate to see his death count for nothing. And he would appreciate the humor of it."

"He might at that," he said, with a faint smile. "All right, minstrel, as you've done me good service, I'll consider what you've said." And he offered me his hand, surprising me. I hesitated.

"My fief and my castle belong to my king, to the last stone," he said coolly. "But my hand is my own."

"Yes, my lord," I said, accepting his clasp.

"One last thing, minstrel. The day we met, you said you'd taken to the road because you were bodyguard to young Gloucester and he died. But were you not more than bodyguard to him? Could it be he was your own half-brother?"

I met his stare. My silence was its own answer.

"I think old Gloucester erred in letting you stray off, minstrel, however you were born. Good luck to you."

"And to you, my lord."

It was nearer midnight than dawn when the girl and I rode out through the town gate, with the road ahead shining like a ribbon in the starlight. I reined in my mount, halting him beneath the cage of shame for a moment.

"What is it?" Rowena asked.

"Nothing," I said, and in truth there was nothing. There were no goodbyes to be said to the Meistersinger. His bones were still moldering above, but his soul was free of this place now. Free to wander with the wind. And so was I.

I clucked to my mount and turned his head north, toward the river. And Strathclyde. It is wild country, I hear, but beautiful. I wonder what songs they sing there?

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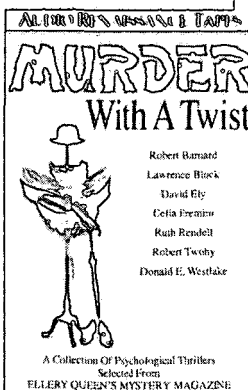
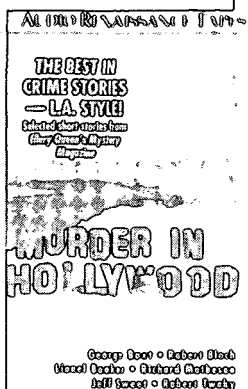
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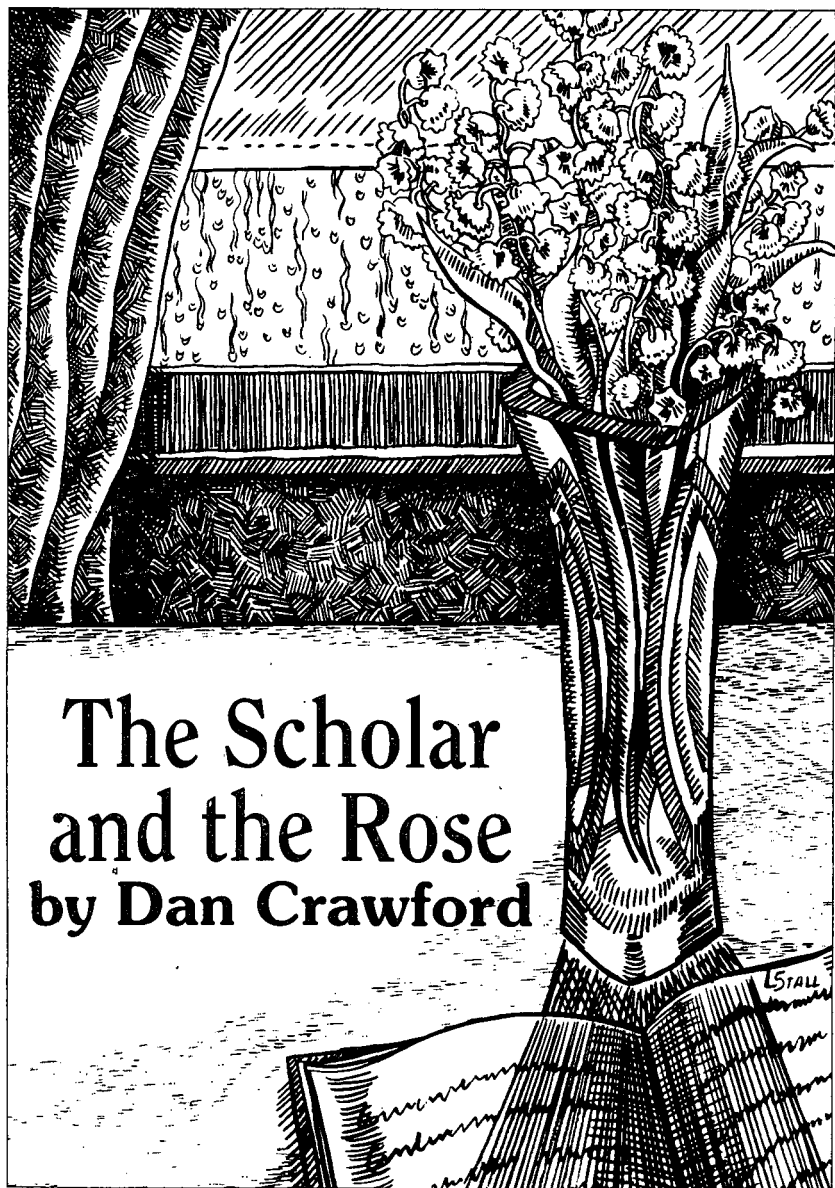
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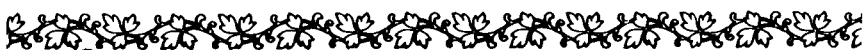
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# The Scholar and the Rose

by Dan Crawford



After all the trouble he'd been to to get this far, Everleigh thought he was entitled to a few amenities. But these could get a bit irritating when they cut down on his working time. The building's curator adjusted the glass of Diet Coke next to the little bunch of lily-of-the-valley in the glass vase.

"May I bring you anything else?" he asked.

"Benny, believe me, that's just fine."

Releasing the frosted glass, the curator moved to the door, stepped outside, and locked it so that any tours passing through the house wouldn't disturb the researcher. The Parks'es place in history had been insecure in the last decade or so; Mr. Everleigh's book might bring them back into the public consciousness.

Once he was sure Benny's footsteps had receded, Everleigh rose and hurried to one of the inset bookcases that stood around the grand library. Counting carefully the volumes in Motley's Works, he found the right one and opened it to page twenty-seven. There was no page twenty-seven, or, for that matter, any pages higher than twenty-six. These chapters had been carved out to make a tidy hiding place for a smaller book.

Should the board of Bold Brook Farm find out he'd discovered the hiding place of a book that wasn't supposed to exist any more, he'd lose not only his permission to work there but very likely all his notebooks as well. The staff there was mighty protective of the Parks'es.

Everleigh had been studying Joan and Adrian Parks ever since, as an undergraduate, he had started a history of his college, just for something to do in his spare time. That book had come to nothing, and the Parks'es had had to be pushed to a back burner as he pursued his career. But they had never really disappeared completely from his plans. When he heard about the opportunities being offered by the publicity-minded board of the old estate, he quickly applied for permission.

Bold Brook Farm had been preserved more or less as it was when the Parks'es lived there, though in fact they had seldom been home. They were always on the move, risking their lives sometimes in a crusade to spread the word about birth control. Joan, in an era when women in public life were still considered dancing dogs, had moved across the country making speeches, barging into offices of politicians to demand that this or that be done to further her crusade. She and Adrian made several perilous journeys to take cru-

sade into underdeveloped countries, of which there were plenty in those days before World War I.

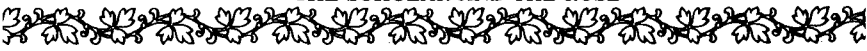
"I believe in meeting the world chin on," Adrian Parks had said, perhaps not knowing that he would be quoted in speeches to high school graduating classes and incoming freshmen at colleges for generations to come. The Parkses had lived their lives go-forward, the dean had told Everleigh's class.

Everleigh set the little book at the very edge of the desk that had once belonged to its owner's father. Then he took a drink and, after considering glass, vase, and papers, he rearranged things so that he could cover the diary quickly if Benny returned. With any luck, though, there would be a tour or two for the curator to attend.

Reaching carefully across this array so as not to risk tipping over his glass, he drew the desk lamp down closer. Flora had excruciatingly tiny handwriting. The shades were drawn, both to hide him from any passing tours and to keep out some of the summer heat. The Parkses had intended this room to have a grand view of the grounds. That meant it also got the full brunt of the sunshine. The room could be suffocating, even with the air conditioning installed by the trustees in the sixties. What must it have been like in the day of the Parkses' prime?

Children, as might be expected, had no scheduled role in the prime of the Parkses, but there had been one daughter, Flora. She'd been an unplanned pregnancy and had never appeared in the Parkses' travels. To give the crusaders their due, they probably hadn't considered the embarrassment. It was just that letting Joan venture into the wilds lost them enough sympathy in civilized lands without dragging a little girl along as well. And Flora was born delicate; they hadn't wanted to endanger her. But also, as far as Everleigh could learn, they hadn't wanted to bother with her much.

Everleigh had so far found not a single word of blame in Flora's diary. She was proud of her globe-trotting parents; they "worked so hard." Trying to keep up with their work, she spent long hours in this library, left home alone when school was out, the books and the building her only companions. She detailed all her studies as she set down all the features of the clothes her mother brought back for her from the corners of the earth, invariably the wrong size because Joan could never remember Flora's age or height. "But she has so many other things to think about," wrote Flora in those teeny letters.



One glance behind his back, and Everleigh opened the little book to where he'd left off. If the trustees learned of the diary's existence, they would most likely try to destroy it. Everleigh himself would have liked to carry it off to avert that possibility, but that way could lie discovery, disgrace, and most important, destruction of the diary after they found him trying to smuggle it out. A transcription took longer but was safer.

"Nov = 11 = '11," he wrote. In this era of photocopy, a scholar was not accustomed to longhand copying. Dozens of abbreviations made the job quicker, with the little equals sign to show where the abbreviation was his and not present in the original. If anyone came across this transcription before he was ready, it might serve as a rude code, confusing them.

Everleigh had reached the crucial period, the final days leading up to the tragedy. It seemed appropriately gloomy to hear rain hitting the windows, though the sky had been cloudless when he came in.

Flower petals hit the desk right on cue, too, falling into the shape of what was almost a pinkish face. He supposed it had been a late bloomer, and frail. He took a drink, then a deep breath, and looked back to the diary.

"I was introduced to a man named Isaiah Grehling, a cousin of Ed = Chandler. He is not a young man, I think, though not quite as old as Father. He has much the same manner, however, the kind of man who can demand respect of others, and accord them the same respect. He is a man of learning and dignity, and we spoke for some time about matters in Armenia."

Further facts about Grehling had come out at the trial, of course. The facts were not what mattered to Everleigh but the coloring Flora gave them. You could spot the signs of mental affliction—or the passion of a teenager, which amounted to the same thing—in her handwriting, in her choice of words.

To read it all, even though this was the second time, made his eyes burn and twisted his stomach. On the first read-through, when he had had so light a lunch, it had made him genuinely queasy. When he reached the end of 1911, Everleigh sat back to wipe his forehead and take another drink. The glass was full again, with fresh ice cubes. Good old Benny must have ordered someone to check from time to time to make sure his drink was replenished. Luckily, whoever it was had had the manners not to get close enough to disturb him and perhaps see what he was up to.



Years had passed since all of Flora's misadventures: decades. Yet Everleigh felt a strange reluctance to get into 1912. He was as isolated as Flora had been, and he felt it. The dark library seemed to have closed in around him. This has nothing to do with you, Everleigh told himself; this was a long time ago. Wiping his forehead again, he looked down at the diary once more.

He concentrated on just copying the words now, letting the sound of the rain distract him from the details of how Flora had talked with Grehling again, how they had come together in furtive but progressively longer trysts, how he assuaged her loneliness, how he convinced her she was doing no wrong, how he trained her to do no wrong in more exotic ways—for love of him, she thought, until the night he had her perform for a select group of his friends. How she had cried, how he had convinced her to do it again, and again, for larger groups.

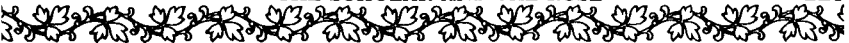
And, finally, how much he had bled.

The trial had been a noisy one, even before the day of the tabloid. But Joan and Adrian Parks were still somebodies, and the deceased had practiced his arts on other young women of weak will. Flora went free, if returning to this house under guard by an army of nurses could be called such.

The diary entries were shorter and sparser thereafter. Flora described her nurses, all of whom had strong wills, strong arms, and strong convictions as to the best cure for young women with mental problems. These months were as bad as anything else in the diary. Everleigh was glad of the cat that had pushed its way into his lap. The touch of something living comforted him as he transcribed the concluding entries, as it became harder for her to find time to write, what with the treatments, and, as a result of the treatments, as it became harder for her to fit words together into intelligible sentences. The paragraphs repeatedly trailed off into disjointed recollections of Isaiah Grehling's more winning ways, and self-recrimination.

After that came only blank pages. Everleigh could fill in the rest of the story from newspaper articles he'd already read. The nurses had come to a mutual agreement that any effort to postpone Flora's suicide amounted to cruelty. Here, in this library, from that chandelier . . .

Everleigh stroked the cat and reached for the glass, leaving the diary open to a blank page. The glass was full again, and the ice was fresh. He held it up to eye level and let the ice clink. Wouldn't



he have heard the key in the lock, no matter how hard he was concentrating? In this silence, the sound would have been as obvious as a gunshot. And however did the cat get in?

As he set down the glass, his eyes went to the little face of pink petals. Pink petals? From white lily-of-the-valley?

One hand continued to slide along the cat's back as he poked through the petals. He considered those petals, which were too large to have dropped from lily-of-the-valley in any case. He also thought about the fresh ice.

And then he thought, without much cheer, "This is not fur under my hand. It is hair."

One glance at what was in his lap sent him speeding for the door. He had always been able to unlock it from his side before, but now the bolt seemed unwilling to turn. Thunder rattled the house, and rain slashed at the windows.

The door swung wide with a bang, and Everleigh shot through the old house. The lights seemed to be out everywhere. Had he worked so long? Had Benny failed, somehow, to come to alert him that they were shutting for the night? The curtains had not been drawn, and water was cascading down the glass. Yet the odor in the house was dry, the dryness of dusty solitude.

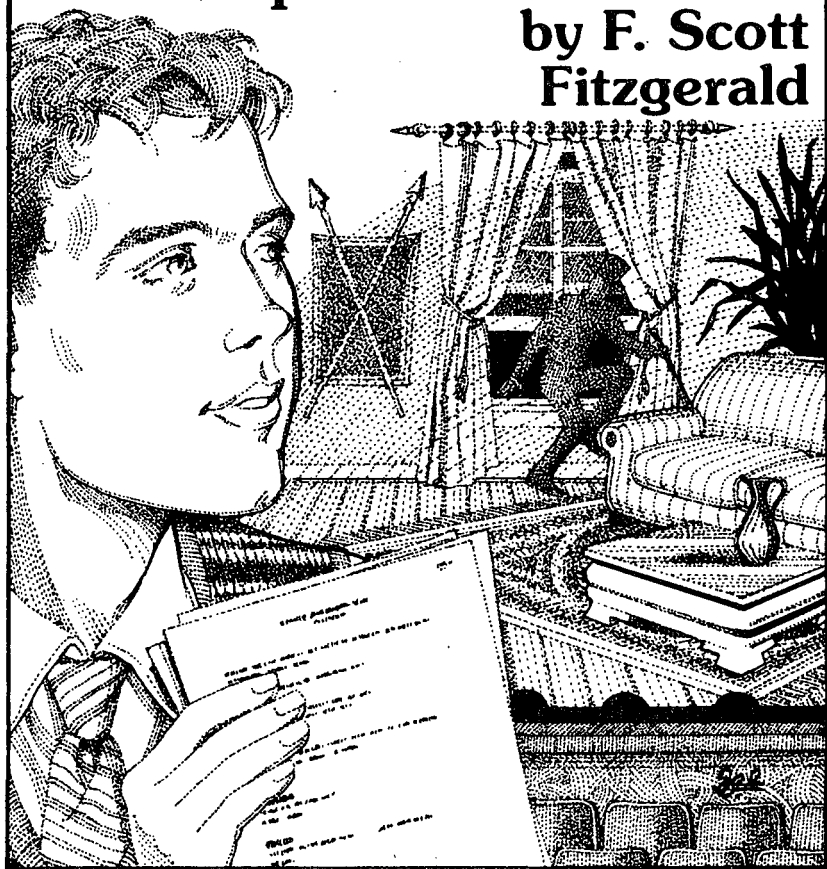
Everleigh was sure he heard the words "Don't go!" as he hit the front door. He was not so certain about "Don't leave her alone!" His chief concern was the door itself, which was being even more difficult than the library door. He had to throw a shoulder against it to make good his exit.

A tour group studied him with some interest as he wiped sweat from his forehead. Behind them, the afternoon sun was as bright as a child's hopes, the sky as clear as a girl's dream.

## MYSTERY CLASSIC

# The Captured Shadow

by F. Scott  
Fitzgerald



**B**asil Duke Lee shut the front door behind him and turned on the dining room light. His mother's voice drifted sleepily downstairs:  
"Basil, is that you?"

"No, mother, it's a burglar."

"It seems to me twelve o'clock is pretty late for a fifteen-year-old boy."

"We went to Smith's and had a soda."

Whenever a new responsibility devolved upon Basil he was "a boy almost sixteen," but when a privilege was in question, he was "a fifteen-year-old boy."

There were footsteps above, and Mrs. Lee, in kimono, descended to the first landing.

"Did you and Riply enjoy the play?"

"Yes, very much."

"What was it about?"

"Oh, it was just about this man. Just an ordinary play."

"Didn't it have a name?"

"Are You a Mason?"

"Oh." She hesitated, covetously watching his alert and eager face, holding him there. "Aren't you coming to bed?"

"I'm going to get something to eat."

"Something more?"

For a moment he didn't answer. He stood in front of a glassed-in bookcase in the living room, examining its contents with an equally glazed eye.

"We're going to get up a play," he said suddenly. "I'm going to write it."

"Well—that'll be very nice. Please come to bed soon. You were up late last night, too, and you've got dark circles under your eyes."

From the bookcase Basil presently extracted *Van Bibber and Others*, from which he read while he ate a large plate of straw softened with a half pint of cream. Back in the living room he sat for a few minutes at the piano, digesting, and meanwhile staring at the colored cover of a song from *The Midnight Sons*. It showed three men in evening clothes and opera hats sauntering jovially along Broadway against the blazing background of Times Square.

Basil would have denied incredulously the suggestion that that was currently his favorite work of art. But it was.

He went upstairs. From a drawer of his desk he took out a composition book and opened it.

BASIL DUKE LEE  
ST. REGIS SCHOOL  
EASTCHESTER, CONN.  
FIFTH FORM FRENCH

and on the next page, under Irregular Verbs:

PRESENT

*je connais          nous con*  
*tu connais*  
*il connaît*

He turned over another page.

MR. WASHINGTON SQUARE

A Musical Comedy by  
BASIL DUKE LEE  
Music by Victor Herbert

ACT I

[*The porch of the Millionaires' Club, near New York.*  
*Opening Chorus, LEILIA and DEBUTANTES:*

*We sing not soft, we sing not loud*  
*For no one ever heard an opening chorus.*  
*We are a very merry crowd*  
*But no one ever heard an opening chorus.*  
*We're just a crowd of debutantes*  
*As merry as can be*  
*And nothing that there is could ever bore us*  
*We're the wittiest ones, the prettiest ones,*  
*In all society*  
*But no one ever heard an opening chorus.*

LEILIA (*stepping forward*): Well, girls, has Mr. Washington Square been around here today?

Basil turned over a page. There was no answer to Leilia's question. Instead in capitals was a brand-new heading:

HIC! HIC! HIC!

A Hilarious Farce in One Act

by

BASIL DUKE LEE

SCENE

*[A fashionable apartment near Broadway, New York City. It is almost midnight. As the curtain goes up there is a knocking at the door and a few minutes later it opens to admit a handsome man in a full evening dress and a companion. He has evidently been imbibing, for his words are thick, his nose is red, and he can hardly stand up. He turns up the light and comes down centre.]*

STUYVESANT: Hic! Hic! Hic!

O'HARA (*his companion*): Begorra, you been sayin' nothing else all this evening.

Basil turned over a page and then another, reading hurriedly, but not without interest.

PROFESSOR PUMPKIN: Now, if you are an educated man, as you claim, perhaps you can tell me the Latin word for "this."

STUYVESANT: Hic! Hic! Hic!

PROFESSOR PUMPKIN: Correct. Very good indeed. I—

At this point "Hic! Hic! Hic!" came to an end in midsentence. On the following page, in just as determined a hand as if the last two works had not faltered by the way, was the heavily underlined beginning of another:

THE CAPTURED SHADOW

A Melodramatic Farce in Three Acts

by BASIL DUKE LEE

SCENE

*[All three acts take place in the library of the VAN BAKERS' house in New York. It is well furnished with a red lamp on one side and*

*some crossed spears and helmets and so on and a divan and a general air of an oriental den.*

*When the curtain rises MISS SAUNDERS, LEILIA VAN BAKER, and ESTELLA CARRAGE are sitting at a table. MISS SAUNDERS is an old maid about forty very kittenish. LEILIA is pretty with dark hair. ESTELLA has light hair. They are a striking combination.*

*The Captured Shadow* filled the rest of the book and ran over into several loose sheets at the end. When it broke off, Basil sat for a while in thought. This had been a season of "crook comedies" in New York, and the feel, the swing, the exact and vivid image of the two he had seen, were in the foreground of his mind. At the time they had been enormously suggestive, opening out into a world much larger and more brilliant than themselves that existed outside their windows and beyond their doors, and it was this suggested world rather than any conscious desire to imitate *Officer 666* that had inspired the effort before him. Presently he printed ACT II at the head of a new tablet and began to write.

An hour passed. Several times he had recourse to a collection of joke books and to an old *Treasury of Wit and Humor* which embalmed the faded Victorian cracks of Bishop Wilberforce and Sydney Smith. At the moment when, in his story, a door moved slowly open, he heard a heavy creak upon the stairs. He jumped to his feet, aghast and trembling, but nothing stirred; only a white moth bounced against the screen, a clock struck the half hour far across the city, a bird whacked its wings in a tree outside.

Voyaging to the bathroom at half past four, he saw with a shock that morning was already blue at the window. He had stayed up all night. He remembered that people who stayed up all night went crazy and, transfixed in the hall, he tried agonizingly to listen to himself, to feel whether or not he was going crazy. The things around him seemed preternaturally unreal, and rushing frantically back into his bedroom, he began tearing off his clothes, racing after the vanishing night. Undressed, he threw a final regretful glance at his pile of manuscript—he had the whole next scene in his head. As a compromise with incipient madness he got into bed and wrote for an hour more.

Late next morning he was startled awake by one of the ruthless Scandinavian sisters who, in theory, were the Lees' servants. "Eleven o'clock!" she shouted. "Five after!"



"Let me alone," Basil mumbled. "What do you come and wake me up for?"

"Somebody downstairs." He opened his eyes. "You ate all the cream last night," Hilda continued. "Your mother didn't have any for her coffee."

"All the cream!" he cried. "Why, I saw some more."

"It was sour."

"That's terrible," he exclaimed, sitting up. "Terrible!"

For a moment she enjoyed his dismay. Then she said, "Riply Buckner's downstairs," and went out, closing the door.

"Send him up!" he called after her. "Hilda, why don't you ever listen for a minute? Did I get any mail?"

There was no answer. A moment later Riply came in.

"My gosh, are you still in bed?"

"I wrote on the play all night. I almost finished Act Two." He pointed to his desk.

"That's what I want to talk to you about," said Riply. "Mother thinks we ought to get Miss Halliburton."

"What for?"

"Just to sort of be there."

Though Miss Halliburton was a pleasant person who combined the occupations of French teacher and bridge teacher, unofficial chaperon and children's friend, Basil felt that her superintendence would give the project an unprofessional ring.

"She wouldn't interfere," went on Riply, obviously quoting his mother. "I'll be the business manager and you'll direct the play, just like we said, but it would be good to have her there for prompter and to keep order at rehearsals. The girls' mothers'll like it."

"All right," Basil agreed reluctantly. "Now look, let's see who we'll have in the cast. First, there's the leading man—this gentleman burglar that's called The Shadow. Only it turns out at the end that he's really a young man about town doing it on a bet, and not really a burglar at all."

"That's you."

"No, that's you."

"Come on! You're the best actor," protested Riply.

"No, I'm going to take a smaller part so I can coach."

"Well, haven't I got to be business manager?"

Selecting the actresses, presumably all eager, proved to be a difficult matter. They settled finally on Imogene Bissel for leading

lady; Margaret Torrence for her friend, and Connie Davies for "Miss Saunders, an old maid very kittenish."

On Riply's suggestion that several other girls wouldn't be pleased at being left out, Basil introduced a maid and a cook, "who could just sort of look in from the kitchen." He rejected firmly Riply's further proposal that there should be two or three maids, "a sort of sewing woman," and a trained nurse. In a house so clogged with femininity even the most umbrageous of gentleman burglars would have difficulty moving about.

"I'll tell you two people we won't have," Basil said meditatively—"that's Joe Gorman and Hubert Blair."

"I wouldn't be in it if we had Hubert Blair," asserted Riply.

"Neither would I."

Hubert Blair's almost miraculous successes with girls had caused Basil and Riply much jealous pain.

They began calling up the prospective cast and immediately the enterprise received its first blow. Imogene Bissel was going to Rochester, Minnesota, to have her appendix removed, and wouldn't be back for three weeks.

They considered.

"How about Margaret Torrence?"

Basil shook his head. He had vision of Leilia Van Baker as someone rarer and more spirited than Margaret Torrence. Not that Leilia had much being, even to Basil—less than the Harrison Fisher girls pinned around his wall at school. But she was not Margaret Torrence. She was no one you could inevitably see by calling up half an hour before on the phone.

He discarded candidate after candidate. Finally a face began to flash before his eyes, as if in another connection, but so insistently that at length he spoke the name.

"Evelyn Beebe."

"Who?"

Though Evelyn Beebe was only sixteen, her precocious charms had elevated her to an older crowd and to Basil she seemed of the very generation of his heroine, Leilia Van Baker. It was a little like asking Sarah Bernhardt for her services, but once her name had occurred to him, other possibilities seemed pale.

At noon they rang the Beebes' doorbell, stricken by a paralysis of embarrassment when Evelyn opened the door herself and, with politeness that concealed a certain surprise, asked them in.

Suddenly, through the portiere of the living room, Basil saw and recognized a young man in golf knickerbockers.

"I guess we better not come in," he said quickly.

"We'll come some other time," Riply added.

Together they started precipitately for the door, but she barred their way.

"Don't be silly," she insisted. "It's just Andy Lockheart."

Just Andy Lockheart—winner of the Western Golf Championship at eighteen, captain of his freshman baseball team, handsome, successful at everything he tried, a living symbol of the splendid, glamorous world of Yale. For a year Basil had walked like him and tried unsuccessfully to play the piano by ear as Andy Lockheart was able to do.

Through sheer ineptitude at escaping, they were edged into the room. Their plan suddenly seemed presumptuous and absurd.

Perceiving their condition Evelyn tried to soothe them with pleasant banter.

"Well, it's about time you came to see me," she told Basil. "Here I've been sitting home every night waiting for you—ever since the Davies dance. Why haven't you been here before?"

He stared at her blankly, unable even to smile, and muttered: "Yes, you have."

"I have though. Sit down and tell me why you've been neglecting me! I suppose you've both been rushing the beautiful Imogene Bissel."

"Why, I understand—" said Basil. "Why, I heard from somewhere that she's gone up to have some kind of an appendicitis—that is—" He ran down to a pitch of inaudibility as Andy Lockheart at the piano began playing a succession of thoughtful chords, which resolved itself into the maxixe, an eccentric stepchild of the tango. Kicking back a rug and lifting her skirts a little, Evelyn fluently tapped out a circle with her heels around the floor.

They sat inanimate as cushions on the sofa watching her. She was almost beautiful, with rather large features and bright fresh color, behind which her heart seemed to be trembling a little with laughter. Her voice and her lithe body were always mimicking, ceaselessly caricaturing every sound and movement nearby, until even those who disliked her admitted that "Evelyn could always make you laugh." She finished her dance now with a false stumble and an awed expression as she clutched the piano, and Basil and Riply chuckled. Seeing their embarrassment lighten, she came and

sat down beside them, and they laughed again when she said: "Excuse my lack of self-control."

"Do you want to be the leading lady in a play we're going to give?" demanded Basil with sudden desperation. "We're going to have it at the Martindale School, for the benefit of the Baby Welfare."

"Basil, this is so sudden."

Andy Lockheart turned around from the piano.

"What're you going to give—a minstrel show?"

"No, it's a crook play named *The Captured Shadow*. Miss Halliburton is going to coach it." He suddenly realized the convenience of that name to shelter himself behind.

"Why don't you give something like *The Private Secretary*?" interrupted Andy. "There's a good play for you. We gave it my last year at school."

"Oh, no, it's all settled," said Basil quickly. "We're going to put on this play that I wrote."

"You wrote it yourself?" exclaimed Evelyn.

"Yes."

"My-y gosh!" said Andy. He began to play again.

"Look, Evelyn," said Basil. "It's only for three weeks, and you'd be the leading lady."

She laughed. "Oh no. I couldn't. Why don't you get Imogene?"

"She's sick, I tell you. Listen—"

"Or Margaret Torrence?"

"I don't want anybody but you."

The directness of this appeal touched her and momentarily she hesitated. But the hero of the Western Golf Championship turned around from the piano with a teasing smile and she shook her head.

"I can't do it, Basil. I may have to go east with the family."

Reluctantly Basil and Riply got up.

"Gosh, I wish you'd be in it, Evelyn."

"I wish I could."

Basil lingered, thinking fast, wanting her more than ever; indeed, without her, it scarcely seemed worthwhile to go on with the play. Suddenly a desperate expedient took shape on his lips:

"You certainly would be wonderful. You see, the leading man is going to be Hubert Blair."

Breathlessly he watched her, saw her hesitate.

"Goodbye," he said.

She came with them to the door and then out on the verandah, frowning a little.

"How long did you say the rehearsals would take?" she asked thoughtfully.

## II

On an August evening three days later Basil read the play to the cast on Miss Halliburton's porch. He was nervous and at first there were interruptions of "Louder" and "Not so fast." Just as his audience was beginning to be amused by the repartee of the two comic crooks—repartee that had seen service with Weber and Fields—he was interrupted by the late arrival of Hubert Blair.

Hubert was fifteen, a somewhat shallow boy save for two or three felicities which he possessed to an extraordinary degree. But one excellence suggests the presence of others, and young ladies never failed to respond to his most casual fancy, enduring his fickleness of heart and never convinced that his fundamental indifference might not be overcome. They were dazzled by his flashing self-confidence, by his cherubic ingenuousness, which concealed a shrewd talent for getting around people, and by his extraordinary physical grace. Long-legged, beautifully proportioned, he had that tumbler's balance usually characteristic only of men "built near the ground." He was in constant motion that was a delight to watch, and Evelyn Beebe was not the only older girl who had found in him a mysterious promise and watched him for a long time with something more than curiosity.

He stood in the doorway now with an expression of bogus reverence on his round pert face.

"Excuse me," he said. "Is this the First Methodist Episcopal Church?" Everybody laughed—even Basil. "I didn't know. I thought maybe I was in the right church, but in the wrong pew."

They laughed again, somewhat discouraged. Basil waited until Hubert had seated himself beside Evelyn Beebe. Then he began to read once more, while the others, fascinated, watched Hubert's efforts to balance a chair on its hind legs. This squeaky experiment continued as an undertone to the reading. Not until Basil's desperate "Now, here's where you came in, Hube," did attention swing back to the play.

Basil read for more than an hour. When, at the end, he closed the composition book and looked up shyly, there was a burst of

spontaneous applause. He had followed his models closely, and for all its grotesqueries, the result was actually interesting—it was a play. Afterward he lingered, talking to Miss Halliburton, and he walked home glowing with excitement and rehearsing a little by himself into the August night.

The first week of rehearsal was a matter of Basil climbing back and forth from auditorium to stage, crying, "No! Look here, Connie; you come in more like this." Then things began to happen. Mrs. Van Schellinger came to rehearsal one day and, lingering afterward, announced that she couldn't let Gladys be in "a play about criminals." Her theory was that this element could be removed; for instance, the two comic crooks could be changed to "two funny farmers."

Basil listened with horror. When she had gone he assured Miss Halliburton that he would change nothing. Luckily Gladys played the cook, an interpolated part that could be summarily struck out, but her absence was felt in another way. She was tranquil and tractable, "the most carefully brought-up girl in town," and at her withdrawal rowdiness appeared during rehearsals. Those who had only such lines as "I'll ask Mrs. Van Baker, sir," in Act I and "No, ma'am," in Act III showed a certain tendency to grow restless in between. So now it was:

"Please keep that dog quiet or else send him home!" or:

"Where's that maid? Wake up, Margaret, for heaven's sake!" or:

"What is there to laugh at that's so darn funny?"

More and more the chief problem was the tactful management of Hubert Blair. Apart from his unwillingness to learn his lines, he was a satisfactory hero, but off the stage he became a nuisance. He gave an endless private performance for Evelyn Beebe, which took such forms as chasing her amorously around the hall or flipping peanuts over his shoulder to land mysteriously on the stage. Called to order, he would mutter, "Aw, shut up yourself," just loud enough for Basil to guess, but not to hear.

But Evelyn Beebe was all that Basil had expected. Once on the stage she compelled a breathless attention, and Basil recognized this by adding to her part. He envied the half-sentimental fun that she and Hubert derived from their scenes together and he felt a vague, impersonal jealousy that almost every night after rehearsal they drove around together in Hubert's car.

One afternoon when matters had progressed a fortnight, Hubert came in an hour late, loafed through the first act and then informed

Miss Halliburton that he was going home.

"What for?" Basil demanded.

"I've got some things I got to do."

"Are they important?"

"What business is that of yours?"

"Of course it's my business," said Basil heatedly, whereupon Miss Halliburton interfered.

"There's no use of anybody getting angry. What Basil means, Hubert, is that if it's just some small thing—why, we're all giving up our pleasure to make this play a success."

Hubert listened with obvious boredom.

"I've got to drive downtown and get Father."

He looked coolly at Basil, as if challenging him to deny the adequacy of this explanation.

"Then why did you come an hour late?" demanded Basil.

"Because I had to do something for Mother."

A group had gathered and he glanced around triumphantly. It was one of those sacred excuses, and only Basil saw that it was disingenuous.

"Oh, tripe!" he said.

"Maybe you think so—Bossy."

Basil took a step toward him, his eyes blazing.

"What'd you say?"

"I said 'Bossy.' Isn't that what they call you at school?"

It was true. It had followed him home. Even as he went white with rage a vast impotence surged over him at the realization that the past was always lurking near. The faces of school were around him, sneering and watching. Hubert laughed.

"Get out!" said Basil in a strained voice. "Go on! Get right out!"

Hubert laughed again, but as Basil took a step toward him he retreated.

"I don't want to be in your play anyhow. I never did."

"Then go on out of this hall."

"Now, Basil!" Miss Halliburton hovered breathlessly beside them. Hubert laughed again and looked about for his cap.

"I wouldn't be in your crazy old show," he said. He turned slowly and jauntily, and sauntered out the door.

Riply Buckner read Hubert's part that afternoon, but there was a cloud upon the rehearsal. Miss Beebe's performance lacked its customary verve and the others clustered and whispered, falling silent when Basil came near. After the rehearsal, Miss Hallibur-



ton, Riply, and Basil held a conference. Upon Basil's flatly refusing to take the leading part, it was decided to enlist a certain Mayall De Bec, known slightly to Riply, who had made a name for himself in theatricals at the Central High School.

But next day a blow fell that was irreparable. Evelyn, flushed and uncomfortable, told Basil and Miss Halliburton that her family's plans had changed—they were going east next week and she couldn't be in the play after all. Basil understood. Only Hubert had held her this long.

"Goodbye," he said gloomily.

His manifest despair shamed her and she tried to justify herself.

"Really, I can't help it. Oh, Basil, I'm so sorry!"

"Couldn't you stay over a week with me after your family goes?" Miss Halliburton asked innocently.

"Not possibly. Father wants us all to go together. That's the only reason. If it wasn't for that I'd stay."

"All right," Basil said. "Goodbye."

"Basil, you're not mad, are you?" A gust of repentance swept over her. "I'll do anything to help. I'll come to rehearsals this week until you get someone else, and then I'll try to help her all I can. But Father says we've got to go."

In vain Riply tried to raise Basil's morale after the rehearsal that afternoon, making suggestions which he waved contemptuously away. Margaret Torrence? Connie Davies? They could hardly play the parts they had. It seemed to Basil as if the undertaking was falling to pieces before his eyes.

It was still early when he got home. He sat dispiritedly by his bedroom window, watching the little Barnfield boy playing a lonesome game by himself in the yard next door.

His mother came in at five, and immediately sensed his depression.

"Teddy Barnfield has the mumps," she said, in an effort to distract him. "That's why he's playing there all alone."

"Has he?" he responded listlessly.

"It isn't at all dangerous, but it's very contagious. You had it when you were seven."

"H'm."

She hesitated.

"Are you worrying about your play? Has anything gone wrong?"

"No, Mother. I just want to be alone."

After a while he got up and started after a malted milk at the soda fountain around the corner. It was half in his mind to see Mr. Beebe and ask him if he couldn't postpone his trip east. If he could only be sure that that was Evelyn's real reason.

The sight of Evelyn's nine-year-old brother coming along the street broke in on his thoughts.

"Hello, Ham. I hear you're going away."

Ham nodded.

"Going next week. To the seashore."

Basil looked at him speculatively, as if, through his proximity to Evelyn, he held the key to the power of moving her.

"Where are you going now?" he asked.

"I'm going to play with Teddy Barnfield."

"What!" Basil exclaimed. "Why, didn't you know—" He stopped. A wild, criminal idea broke over him; his mother's words floated through his mind: "It isn't at all dangerous, but it's very contagious." If little Ham Beebe got the mumps, and Evelyn *couldn't* go away—

He came to a decision quickly and coolly.

"Teddy's playing in the back yard," he said. "If you want to see him without going through his house, why don't you go down this street and turn up the alley?"

"All right. Thanks," said Ham trustingly.

Basil stood for a minute looking after him until he turned the corner into the alley, fully aware that it was the worst thing he had ever done in his life.

### III

A week later Mrs. Lee had an early supper—all Basil's favorite things: chipped beef, french fried potatoes, sliced peaches and cream, and devil's food.

Every few minutes Basil said, "Gosh! I wonder what time it is," and went out in the hall to look at the clock. "Does that clock work right?" he demanded with sudden suspicion. It was the first time the matter had ever interested him.

"Perfectly all right. If you eat so fast you'll have indigestion and then you won't be able to act well."

"What do you think of the program?" he asked for the third time. "Riply Buckner, Jr., presents Basil Duke Lee's comedy, *The Captured Shadow*."

"I think it's very nice."

"He doesn't really present it."

"It sounds very well, though."

"I wonder what time it is?" he inquired.

"You just said it was ten minutes after six."

"Well, I guess I better be starting."

"Eat your peaches, Basil. If you don't eat, you won't be able to act."

"I don't have to act," he said patiently. "All I am is a small part, and it wouldn't matter—" It was too much trouble to explain.

"Please don't smile at me when I come on, Mother," he requested.

"Just act as if I was anybody else."

"Can't I even say how-do-you-do?"

"What?" Humor was lost on him. He said goodbye. Trying very hard to digest not his food but his heart, which had somehow slipped down into his stomach, he started off for the Martindale School.

As its yellow windows loomed out of the night his excitement became insupportable; it bore no resemblance to the building he had been entering so casually for three weeks. His footsteps echoed symbolically and portentously in its deserted hall; upstairs there was only the janitor setting out the chairs in rows, and Basil wondered about the vacant stage until someone came in.

It was Mayall De Bec, the tall, clever, not very likeable youth they had imported from Lower Crest Avenue to be the leading man. Mayall, far from being nervous, tried to engage Basil in casual conversation. He wanted to know if Basil thought Evelyn Beebe would mind if he went to see her sometime when the show was over. Basil supposed not. Mayall said he had a friend whose father owned a brewery who owned a twelve-cylinder car.

Basil said, "Gee!"

At quarter to seven the participants arrived in groups—Riply Buckner with the six boys he had gathered to serve as ticket takers and ushers; Miss Halliburton, trying to seem very calm and reliable; Evelyn Beebe, who came in as if she were yielding herself up to something and whose glance at Basil seemed to say: "Well, it looks as if I'm really going through with it after all."

Mayall De Bec was to make up the boys and Miss Halliburton the girls. Basil soon came to the conclusion that Miss Halliburton knew nothing about makeup, but he judged it diplomatic, in that lady's overwrought condition, to say nothing, but to take each girl

to Mayall for corrections when Miss Halliburton had done.

An exclamation from Bill Kampf, standing at a crack in the curtain, brought Basil to his side. A tall bald-headed man in spectacles had come in and was shown to a seat in the middle of the house, where he examined the program. He was the public. Behind those waiting eyes, suddenly so mysterious and incalculable, was the secret of the play's failure or success. He finished the program, took off his glasses, and looked around. Two old ladies and two little boys came in, followed immediately by a dozen more.

"Hey, Riply," Basil called softly. "Tell them to put the children down in front."

Riply, struggling into his policeman's uniform, looked up, and the long black mustache on his upper lip quivered indignantly.

"I thought of that long ago."

That hall, filling rapidly, was now alive with the buzz of conversation. The children in front were jumping up and down in their seats, and everyone was talking and calling back and forth save the several dozen cooks and housemaids who sat in stiff and quiet pairs about the room.

Then, suddenly, everything was ready. It was incredible. "Stop! Stop!" Basil wanted to say. "It can't be ready. There must be something—there always has been something," but the darkened auditorium and the piano and violin from Geyer's Orchestra playing "Meet Me in the Shadows" belied his words. Miss Saunders, Leilia Van Baker, and Leilia's friend, Estella Carrage, were already seated on the stage, and Miss Halliburton stood in the wings with the prompt book. Suddenly the music ended and the chatter in front died away.

Oh, gosh! Basil thought. Oh, my gosh!

The curtain rose. A clear voice floated up from somewhere. Could it be from that unfamiliar group on the stage?

*I will, Miss Saunders. I tell you I will!*

*But, Miss Leilia, I don't consider the newspapers proper for young ladies nowadays.*

*I don't care. I want to read about this wonderful gentleman burglar they call The Shadow.*

It was actually going on. Almost before he realized it, a ripple of laughter passed over the audience as Evelyn gave her imitation of Miss Saunders behind her back.

"Get ready, Basil," breathed Miss Halliburton.

Basil and Bill Kampf, the crooks, each took an elbow of Victor Van Baker, the dissolute son of the house, and made ready to aid him through the front door.

It was strangely natural to be out on the stage with all those eyes looking up encouragingly. His mother's face floated past him, other faces that he recognized and remembered.

Bill Kampf stumbled on a line and Basil picked him up quickly and went on.

MISS SAUNDERS: So you are alderman from the Sixth Ward?

RABBIT SIMMONS: Yes, ma'am.

MISS SAUNDERS (*shaking her head kittenishly*): Just what is an alderman?

CHINAMAN RUDD: An alderman is halfway between a politician and a pirate.

This was one of Basil's lines that he was particularly proud of—but there was not a sound from the audience, not a smile. A moment later Bill Kampf absentmindedly wiped his forehead with his handkerchief and then stared at it, startled by the red stains of makeup on it—and the audience roared. The theater was like that.

MISS SAUNDERS: Then you believe in spirits, Mr. Rudd.

CHINAMAN RUDD: Yes, ma'am, I certainly do believe in spirits. Have you got any?

The first big scene came. On the darkened stage a window rose slowly and Mayall De Bec, "in a full evening dress," climbed over the sill. He was tiptoeing cautiously from one side of the stage to the other, when Leilia Van Baker came in. For a moment she was frightened, but he assured her that he was a friend of her brother Victor. They talked. She told him naively yet feelingly of her admiration for The Shadow, of whose exploits she had read. She hoped, though, that The Shadow would not come here tonight, as the family jewels were all in that safe at the right.

The stranger was hungry. He had been late for his dinner and so had not been able to get any that night. Would he have some crackers and milk? That would be fine. Scarcely had she left the room when he was on his knees by the safe, fumbling at the catch,

undeterred by the unpromising word "Cake" stencilled on the safe's front. It swung open, but he heard footsteps outside and closed it just as Leilia came back with the crackers and milk.

They lingered, obviously attracted to each other. Miss Saunders came in, very kittenish, and was introduced. Again Evelyn mimicked her behind her back and the audience roared. Other members of the household appeared and were introduced to the stranger.

What's this? A banging at the door, and Mulligan, a policeman, rushes in.

*We have just received word from the Central Office that the notorious Shadow has been seen climbing in the window! No one can leave this house tonight!*

The curtain fell. The first rows of the audience—the younger brothers and sisters of the cast—were extravagant in their enthusiasm. The actors took a bow.

A moment later Basil found himself alone with Evelyn Beebe on the stage. A weary doll in her makeup she was leaning against a table.

"Heigh-ho, Basil," she said.

She had not quite forgiven him for holding her to her promise after her little brother's mumps had postponed their trip east, and Basil had tactfully avoided her, but now they met in the genial glow of excitement and success.

"You were wonderful," he said "—wonderful!"

He lingered a moment. He could never please her, for she wanted someone like herself, someone who could reach her through her senses, like Hubert Blair. Her intuition told her that Basil was of a certain vague consequence; beyond that his incessant attempts to make people think and feel, bothered and wearied her. But suddenly, in the glow of the evening, they leaned forward and kissed peacefully, and from that moment, because they had no common ground even to quarrel on, they were friends for life.

When the curtain rose upon the second act Basil slipped down a flight of stairs and up another to the back of the hall, where he stood watching in the darkness. He laughed silently when the audience laughed, enjoying it as if it were a play he had never seen before.

There was a second and a third act scene that were very similar. In each of them The Shadow, alone on the stage, was interrupted

by Miss Saunders. Mayall De Bec, having had but ten days of rehearsal, was inclined to confuse the two, but Basil was totally unprepared for what happened. Upon Connie's entrance Mayall spoke his third-act line and involuntarily Connie answered in kind.

Others coming on the stage were swept up in the nervousness and confusion, and suddenly they were playing the third act in the middle of the second. It happened so quickly that for a moment Basil had only a vague sense that something was wrong. Then he dashed down one stairs and up another and into the wings, crying:

"Let down the curtain! Let down the curtain!"

The boys who stood there aghast sprang to the rope. In a minute Basil, breathless, was facing the audience.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "there's been changes in the cast and what just happened was a mistake. If you'll excuse us we'd like to do that scene over."

He stepped back in the wings to a flutter of laughter and applause.

"All right, Mayall!" he called excitedly. "On the stage alone. Your line is: 'I just want to see that the jewels are all right,' and Connie's is: 'Go ahead, don't mind me.' All right! Curtain up!"

In a moment things righted themselves. Someone brought water for Miss Halliburton, who was in a state of collapse, and as the act ended they all took a curtain call once more. Twenty minutes later it was over. The hero clasped Leilia Van Baker to his breast, confessing that he was The Shadow, "and a captured Shadow at that"; the curtain went up and down, up and down; Miss Halliburton was dragged unwillingly on the stage and the ushers came up the aisles laden with flowers. Then everything became informal and the actors mingled happily with the audience, laughing and important, congratulated from all sides. An old man whom Basil didn't know came up to him and shook his hand, saying, "You're a young man that's going to be heard from someday," and a reporter from the paper asked him if he was really only fifteen. It might all have been very bad and demoralizing for Basil, but it was already behind him. Even as the crowd melted away and the last few people spoke to him and went out, he felt a great vacancy come into his heart. It was over, it was done and gone—all that work, and interest and absorption. It was a hollowness like fear.

"Goodnight, Miss Halliburton. Goodnight, Evelyn."

"Goodnight, Basil. Congratulations, Basil. Goodnight."

"Where's my coat? Goodnight, Basil."



"Leave your costumes on the stage, please. They've got to go back tomorrow."

He was almost the last to leave, mounting to the stage for a moment and looking around the deserted hall. His mother was waiting and they strolled home together through the first cool night of the year.

"Well, I thought it went very well indeed. Were you satisfied?" He didn't answer for a moment. "Weren't you satisfied with the way it went?"

"Yes." He turned his head away.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing," and then, "Nobody really cares, do they?"

"About what?"

"About anything."

"Everybody cares about different things. I care about you, for instance."

Instinctively he ducked away from a hand extended caressingly toward him: "Oh, don't. I don't mean like that."

"You're just overwrought, dear."

"I am not overwrought. I just feel sort of sad."

"You shouldn't feel sad. Why, people told me after the play—"

"Oh, that's all over. Don't talk about that—don't ever talk to me about that any more."

"Then what are you sad about?"

"Oh, about a little boy."

"What little boy?"

"Oh, little Ham—you wouldn't understand."

"When we get home I want you to take a real hot bath and quiet your nerves."

"All right."

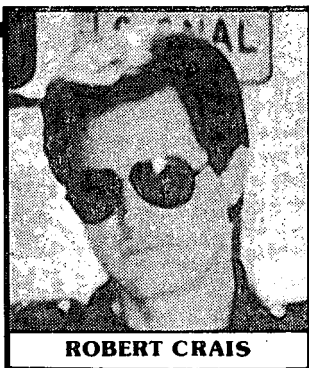
But when he got home he fell immediately into deep sleep on the sofa. She hesitated. Then covering him with a blanket and a comforter, she pushed a pillow under his protesting head and went upstairs.

She knelt for a long time beside her bed.

"God, help him! help him," she prayed, "because he needs help that I can't give him any more."

# BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



ROBERT CRAIS

With his first novel, *The Monkey's Raincoat*, Robert Crais won both the Anthony and the Macavity awards. These are kudos that authors love to receive, for they are voted on by you and me, their readers. At the same time Crais also earned high praise from his professional colleagues. "Robert B. Parker has some competition on his hands," said Sue Grafton. Lawrence Sanders urged everyone to "grab this one—it's a winner," while Tony Hillerman declared *The Monkey's Raincoat* to be "a dazzling first novel." Crais followed up his first Elvis Cole yarn with three more cases: *Stalking the Angel*, *Lullaby Town*, and his latest, *Free Fall* (Bantam, \$18). In the meantime, *The Monkey's Raincoat*, which had been published as a

paperback original, was long out of print.

But never fear, dear reader. Crais's canny publisher has just reissued that award-winning first novel, albeit in a higher-priced hardcover edition (Doubleday Perfect Crime, \$17). So Elvis Cole fans can now stop haunting used bookshops and instead settle down with the book that had everyone raving back in 1987.

Walk into the L.A. office of Elvis Cole (conveniently situated above a takeout deli) and you can take a load off in one of his comfortable director's chairs. Sit back then to admire his Disney figurines, and run the risk of letting the hypnotic rhythm of his Pinocchio clock (with moving eyeballs) lull you into assuming that this thirty-five-year-old laid-back guy isn't

very tough. You'd be wrong, however. Dead wrong.

In the best tradition of hard-boiled P.I.'s, Cole is a former Vietnam vet, ex-cop, and practicing student of martial arts. Just like Travis Magee, Cole is also ready to offer very personal comfort to suffering female clients. Yet the L.A. homicide cop Poitras, with whom Cole has a love/hate relationship, calls the conclusion of this case "Rambo Goes to Hollywood"; the body count was at eleven stiffes when Poitras stopped counting. Cole's a good man to have around, even without Pike, his deadly, silent partner. He just *talks* as if he's never outgrown Saturday

morning cartoon shows, admitting that what he really wants out of life is to be Peter Pan.

*The Monkey's Raincoat* introduces a cast of characters that we'll grow to know even better in subsequent novels, and Crais limns the major players in each novel with detail and credibility. The pace clips along, the plots have twists, and the jokes never stop. Cole has personality, and he tells his stories truly. It can't be easy entering the half-century-old tradition of the American private eye genre, upholding what readers love, and yet infusing a fresh nineties perspective. Robert Crais manages to do so, however, quite successfully.

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## MYSTERY REVIEWS

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More praise for Sue Grafton's latest Kinsey Millhone novel may be coals to Newcastle, but I had "**J**" *Is for Judgment* in hand for no more than ten minutes before I found myself cracking it open and settling down with it onto my couch. Once again, Grafton delivers the goods. Wendell Jaffee disappeared off his sailboat five years ago, right before the law caught up to him. That left his investment partner with the bag and a jail sentence, and his wife and two sons in dire financial straits. The "judgment" of the title is the court's recent declaration that Wendell Jaffee is legally dead, earning the patient widow her half million dollar insurance benefit. Then Jaffee is spotted, still very much alive, in a Mexican bar. Kinsey's former employer, California Fidelity, wants proof that they've just paid out a death benefit on a live crook. As a counterpoint, Kinsey's investigation turns up some of her longlost relatives, a novelty for the loner P.I. (and one she promises to develop in subsequent letters of the alphabet). Reserve *your* judgment until the end of the book, where Grafton manages to pull off a surprising twist. At that point, I suspect that every reader will

agree that "*J Is for Judgment* is one of the strongest in this popular series. (Henry Holt, \$21.95)

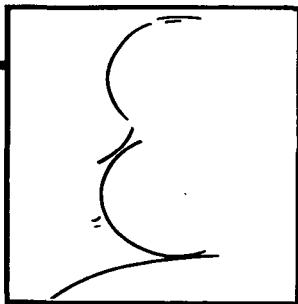
**Southern Discomfort** by Margaret Maron (Mysterious Press, \$18.95) brings back Colleton County district court judge Deborah Knott, who debuted in *Bootlegger's Daughter* last year. Maron's smalltown North Carolina setting makes a promising background for this savvy, strong-willed career politician with a great sense of humor. The judge is now on the bench, and it's time to make good on the campaign promises, one of which is to join the crew of an all-women project of building a home for a needy single mother. Maron gives her character strong ties to kith and kin and her community, but endows her with a purpose and drive the equal of any urban feminist's. I eagerly anticipate the next Deborah Knott novel.

On a very different note is **Wakefield Hall** by Francesca Stanfill (Villard, \$23), a big novel that harkens back to those by Daphne Du Maurier. Elizabeth Rowan is a *Wall Street Journal* reporter who has signed a big book contract. As stipulated in Joanna Easkins' will, Elizabeth is to write an authorized biography of the celebrated Shakespearean actress. Her research begins at Wakefield Hall, the fabulous estate that consumed the actress's final, secluded years. It will end there, too, but not before Elizabeth has faced the deadly secrets that flew out when her arrival opened a Pandora's box at Wakefield Hall. Stanfill has written a lushly romantic gothic, lovingly detailing dazzling apartments and eccentric characters, delighting this Shakespeare buff with countless references to the Bard and the theater, and gloriously fulfilling any modern woman's fantasy in her character of the architect. Settle down with a box of Godiva chocolates and *Wakefield Hall*: then sigh with contentment.

Some years ago Will Harriss won the Edgar for *The Bay Psalm Book Murder*, and fans have longed for another. Now there's **Noble Rot** (St. Martin's, \$17.95), and it's a charmer. Young Vinnie Letessier has a degree and no money, so he goes to work in his uncle's Napa Valley winery. Chateau Letessier has been suffering financial difficulties, but they are the least of it when Vinnie discovers a corpse in the fermentation tank. And as one expects in mystery novels, things quickly go from bad to worse. By the end, however, the reader has been wined and dined on details about winegrowing and Napa Valley, with a hint of budding romance to add some bubbly. This is light fare, ingenuous and fun.

# MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



**G**riffin Mill, the film executive who is the lead character in *The Player*, says the elements he needs to market a film are suspense, laughter, violence, hope, heart, nudity, sex, and happy endings—mainly happy endings.

During a romantic evening with the not-so-griefstricken girlfriend of a murdered man, he tells her his studio gets fifty thousand stories a year and can only say yes maybe twelve times a year.

If that's the case, only a fraction of that dozen, and of the few dozens from other studios, might be considered mystery or suspense films, thrillers or crime stories. Of those few, certainly fewer are quality affairs.

Five motion pictures were nominated for the Edgar Allan Poe Award for Best Screenplay of 1992: *A Few Good Men*, *The Crying Game*, *The Player*,

*Sneakers*, and *Unforgiven*. It's no mystery, especially if you were with us last time, that the award went to Michael Tolkin for *The Player*, which he adapted from his novel. (All the Edgar nominees and winners were listed in AHMM's August issue.)

While *The Player* is known more as a satire of Hollywood than as a mystery, the plot does revolve, in part, around the murder of an unsuccessful screenwriter. It also contains a shot with Hitchcock in it—watch for that.

The lead-in to the on-screen murder is an escalating series of poison-pen postcards that come to Griffin Mill's office. Rather than alerting the proper authorities, Mill, played by Tim Robbins, simply puts the cards in his desk drawer. There's a lot of politics in the studio, and Mill doesn't want to seem like some scaredy cat, lest

he be replaced by a tougher guy.

Mill's high-level job is to listen to movie pitches, lots of them. The film opens with a pitch for *The Graduate, Part II*, in which Julia Roberts would play the daughter of Dustin Hoffman and Katharine Ross. While he likes that idea, there are hundreds he dismisses, usually with a phony, Hollywoodish "I'll get back to you on that."

It's the writer behind one of those hundreds, he guesses, who has become his pen pal. A guy he never got back to.

With a little deductive reasoning and some checking of his voluminous logs of meetings and phone calls, Mill settles on a suspect.

His troubles are just beginning.

While all this is going on, Mill continues to take pitches. The best of the lot is a death row melodrama offered by an earnest British writer who wants no stars and no happy endings.

This film within a film, *Ha-beas Corpus*, is about a district attorney who falls in love with a woman convicted of killing her husband, but sends her to the gas chamber nonetheless. In the end, the murder victim is discovered to be alive, but the D.A. is minutes late in his rush to save the woman from execu-

tion. It sounds like a good film noir, actually.

"It's the story of an innocent woman fighting for her life," the writer says. "A tragedy in which an innocent woman dies, because it happens, it's real."

Well, in the spirit of today's Hollywood, it does get made, with much fanfare. But the final result shows the ubiquitous Julia Roberts and the less-than-laudable Bruce Willis starring in a drama in which he saves her at the last minute.

That illustrates the trouble with many of the thrillers coming out of Hollywood today. They are too star-driven rather than writer-driven. The bottom line has become too important, way out of proportion to the story line.

Many studios now use test screenings; the results often determine what winds up on the screen and what drops to the cutting room floor. Whole endings can be altered, negating the writer's initial intent. The entire meaning of a film or the emotions portrayed therein can be changed for the bigger buck.

Perhaps the greatest point *The Player* is making is that moviemaking is no longer an art, just a very big business.

Oh yes, getting back to the story, this one does have a happy ending—from at least one character's point of view. Which one, we won't say.

# THE STORY THAT WON



The April Mysterious Photo-B. Parkell of San Francisco, tions go to Deanne Newton of of Newport News, Virginia; Florida; Lawrence Greenberg Charles Richard Laing of Lee Scarborough of Spanaway, Washington; Sharon Jacobs of Indianola, Nebraska; Jim Gardner of Burlington, North Carolina; Matthew Walters of Northbrook, Illinois; and Kim Agerter of Tiffin, Ohio.

graph contest was won by E. California. Honorable men-Omaha, Texas; L. J. Kinsey Todd H. Latoski of Longwood, of New York, New York; Newark, New Jersey; Kati

Photo by J. K. Potter

## SWEET REVENGE by E. B. Parkell

It had been twenty-four hours since Mrs. Fontenot's body had been found in the back room of her small Royal Street bakery, face down in a fresh mixture of almond-based frangipane.

The morning after Mardi Gras, Blanche, still in costume, stood in the middle of the deserted street staring at the padlocked business, a yellow plastic POLICE CRIME SCENE ribbon cordoning off the area.

She smiled. When she and Delphine Fontenot started the bakery several years before, they had been close friends. But when Delphine forced her out and stole all of Blanche's recipes for their delicious creations, it caused a permanent rift. Blanche had sworn to get even.

The single gunshot had gone unnoticed in the noise and excitement of the throngs of Mardi Gras celebrants.

Elated with her revenge, Blanche walked home. Turning down her street, she saw two police cars in front of her building, their blue lights flashing in the crisp February air.

Suddenly panicking, Blanche remembered that Delphine kept a meticulous schedule of everything she did. "Wash madeleine pans." "Poach pears for Tarte aux Poires." "Prepare apples for Tarte des Demoiselles Tatin." "Make crème fraîche." Everything Delphine did was written down.

As she approached her apartment building, a police officer started toward her. Blanche paused, drawing her lips in a tight, nervous smile. Damn Delphine. And damn her frangipane.

Handcuffs in hand, the officer started reading her her rights. "Blanche Almonds, you have the right to remain silent."



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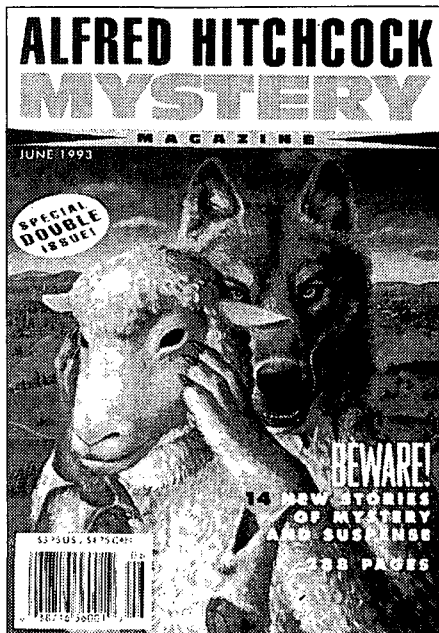
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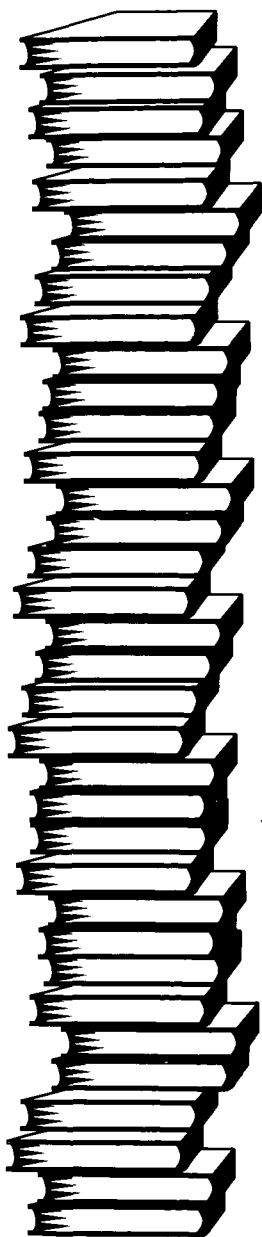
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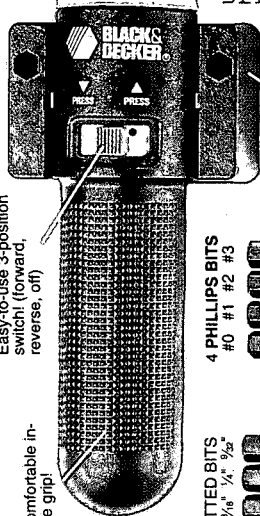
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